

# GREAT SCIENCE FICTION

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NEIL  
BARRETT, JR.



# IT'S EASY TO BE GREAT

Month after month, year after year, the magazines get printed. The editors tear out their hair to get good stories, and even fair stories when deadline time comes and there is a hole that must be plugged. Each month the battle is won, the magazine is sent to the printers, the editors take one deep, long breath—then the battle begins anew for the next issue.

Here at GREAT SCIENCE FICTION we feel pretty smug. We have problems, but not *that* kind of problem. All we have to do is print only the best each issue, and in order to do that we go to the magazines and profit by experience. Every issue of every magazine can't be great—but there *can* be great stories in any issue.

We dig 'em out. We find the stories you missed, the stories in magazines you never had a chance to buy and read, and we look for the great yarns. Our editors all wear thick glasses from reading too much. They all have headaches from reading bad stories. They all have smiles from finding the good ones. They're all happy because they come up with the great ones and put them in this magazine, and our sister magazine THE MOST THRILLING SF, for you to read.

You can't go wrong. Other editors do this same job—only they are called anthologists and they put their stories into books that you have to pay five bucks for.

We do not intend to drive the anthologists out of business—but we shall give them a hard time. The anthologists dig through the old magazines and put together books of stories—which they sell for \$3.95 and \$4.95. Good luck to them.

But we give you the same deal for a half-a-buck.

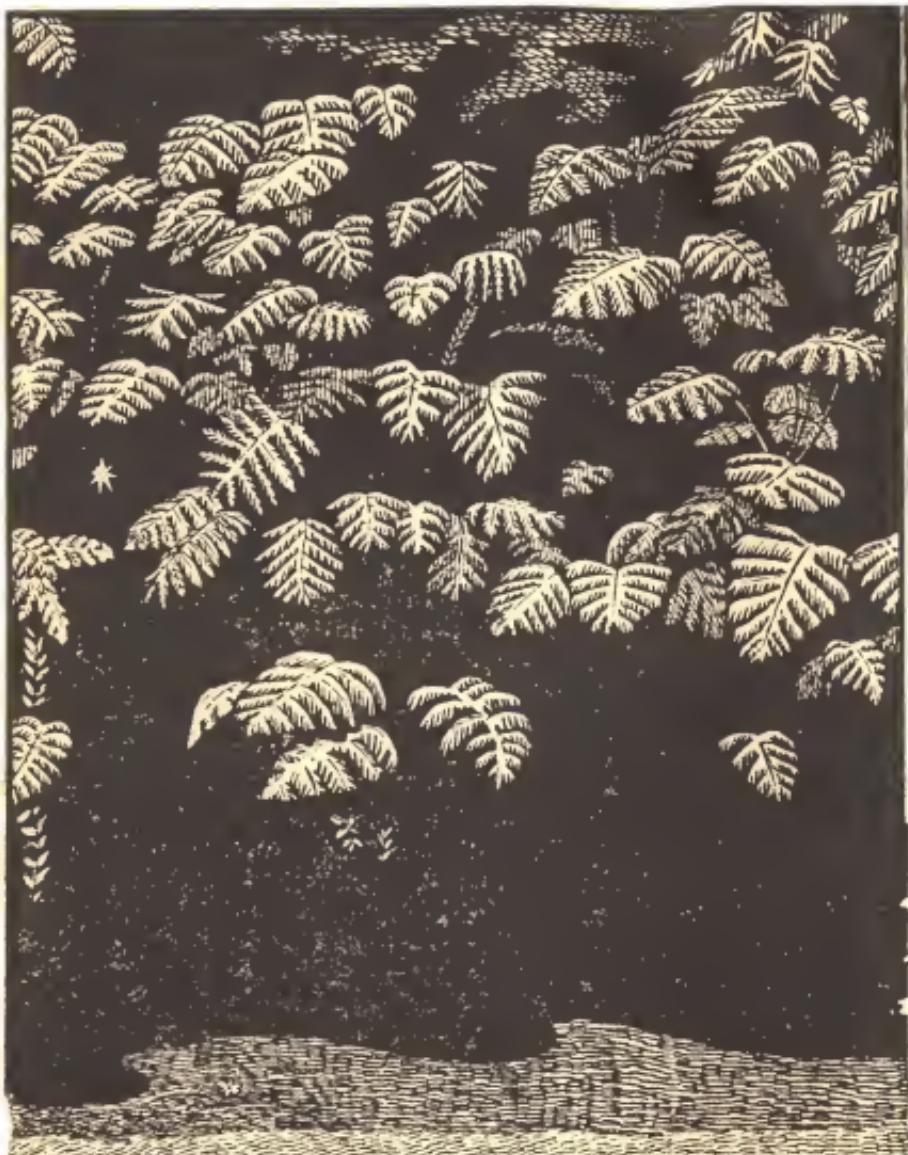
Happy reading!

HARRY HARRISON

# GREAT SCIENCE FICTION

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# I-C-a-BeM

By  
JACK VANCE

*Why do we always think that the BEMs—the beings different from man, more powerful than man—will be aliens? Can we not look at ourselves, men augmented by science to be swift and deadly destroyers, and see a BEM? Here is a tale of intrigue, action, brilliant imagination, a tale as up-to-date as the headlines, a story that may leave you wondering what is actually going on in the world of power politics today.*

**A**CROSS a period of seven months, James Keith had undergone a series of subtle and intricate surgeries, and his normally efficient body had been altered in many ways: "aug-



mented", to use the jargon of the Special Branch, CIA.

Looking into the mirror, he saw a face familiar only from the photographs he had studied—dark, feral and harsh: the face, literally, of a savage. His hair, which he had allowed to grow long, had been oiled, stranded with gold tinsel, braided and coiled; his teeth had been replaced with stainless-steel dentures; from his ears dangled a pair of ivory amulets. In each case, adornment was the secondary function. The tinsel strands in his head-dress were multi-laminated accumulators, their charge maintained by thermoelectric action. The dentures scrambled, condensed, transmitted, received, expanded and unscrambled radio waves of energies almost too low to be detected. The seeming ivory amulets were stereophonic radar units, which not only could guide Keith through the dark, but also provided a fractional second's warning of a bullet, an arrow, a bludgeon. His fingernails were copper-silver alloy, internally connected to the accumulators in his hair. Another circuit served as a ground, to protect him against electrocution—one of his own potent weapons. These were the more obvious augmentations; others more subtle had been fabricated into his flesh.

As he stood before the mirror

two silent technicians wound a narrow *darshba* turban around his head, draped him with a white robe. Keith no longer recognized the image in the mirror as himself. He turned to Carl Sebastiani, who had been watching from across the room—a small man, parchment-pale, with austere cheek-bones and a fragile look to his skull. Sebastiani's title, *Assistant to the Under Director*, understated his authority just as his air of delicacy misrepresented his inner toughness.

"Presently you'll become almost as much Tambi Ngasi as you are James Keith," said Sebastiani. "Quite possibly more. In which case your usefulness ends, and you'll be brought home."

Keith made no comment. He raised his arms, feeling the tension of new connections and conduits. He clenched his right fist, watched three metal stingers appear above his knuckles. He held up his left palm, felt the infra-red radiation emitted by Sebastiani's face. "I'm James Keith. I'll act Tamba Ngasi—but I'll never become him."

Sebastiani chuckled coolly. "A face is an almost irresistible symbol. In any event you'll have little time for introspection . . . Come along up to my office."

THE aides removed Keith's white robe; he followed Se-

bastiani to his official suite, three rooms as calm, cool and elegant as Sebastiani himself. Keith settled into a deep-cushioned chair, Sebastiani slipped behind his desk, where he flicked at a row of buttons. On a screen appeared a large-scale map of Africa. "A new phase seems to be opening up and we want to exploit it." He touched another button, and a small rectangle on the under-part of the great Mauretanian bulge glowed green. "There's Lakhadi. Fejo is that bright point of light by Tabacoundi Bay." He glanced sidelong at Keith. "You remember the floating ICBM silos?"

"Vaguely. They were news twenty years or so ago. I remember the launchings."

Sebastiani nodded. "In 1963. Quite a boondoggle. The ICBM's—Titans—were already obsolete, the silos expensive, maintenance a headache. A month ago they went for surplus to a Japanese salvage firm, warheads naturally not included. Last week Premier Adoui Shgawe of Lakhadi bought them, apparently without the advice, consent or approval of either Russians or Chinese."

Sebastiani keyed four new numbers; the screen flickered and blurred. "Still a new process," said Sebastiani critically. "Images recorded by the deposition of atoms on a light-sensitive

crystal. The camera is disguised, effectively if whimsically, as a common house-fly." A red and gold coruscation exploded upon the screen. "Impurities—rogue molecules, the engineers call them." The image steadied to reveal a high-domed council chamber, brightly lit by diffused sunlight. "The new architecture," said Sebastiani sardonically. "Equal parts of Zimbabwe, Dr. Caligari and the Bolshoi Ballet."

"It has a certain wild charm," said Keith.

"Fejo's the showplace of all Africa; no question but what it's a spectacular demonstration." Sebastiani touched a Hold button, freezing the scene in the council chamber. "Shgawe is at the head of the table, in gold and green. I'm sure you recognize him."

Keith nodded. Shgawe's big body and round muscular face had become almost as familiar as his own.

"To his right is Leonide Pashenko, the Russian ambassador. Opposite is the Chinese ambassador Hsia Lu-Minh. The others are aides." He set the image in motion. "We weren't able to record sound; the lip-reading lab gave us a rough translation . . . Shgawe is now announcing his purchase. He's bland and affable, but watching Pashenko and Hsia like a hawk. They're startled and annoyed, agreeing pos-

sibly for the first time in years . . . Pashenko inquires the need for such grandiose weapons . . . Shgawe replies that they were cheap and will contribute both to the defense and prestige of Lakhadhi. Pashenko says that the U.S.S.R. has guaranteed Lakhadhi's independence, that such concerns are superfluous. Hsia sits thinking. Pashenko is more volatile. He points out that the Titans are not only obsolete and unarmed, but that they require an extensive technical complex to support them.

"Shgawe laughs. 'I realize this and I hereby request this help from the U.S.S.R. If it is not forthcoming, I will make the same request of the Chinese People's Democracy. If still unsuccessful, I shall look elsewhere.'

"Pashenko and Hsia close up like clams. There's bad blood between them; neither trusts the other. Pashenko manages to announce that he'll consult his government, and that's all for to-day."

THE image faded. Sebastiani leaned back in his chair. In two days Tamba Ngasi leaves his constituency, Kotoba on the Dasa River, for the convening of the Grand Parliament at Fejo." He projected a detailed map on the screen, indicated Kotoba and Fejo with a dot of light. "He'll come down the Dasa River by

launch to Dasai, continue to Fejo by train. I suggest that you intercept him at Dasai. Tamba Ngasi is a Leopard Man, and took part in the Rhodesian Extermination. To win his seat in the Grand Parliament he killed his uncle, a brother, and four cousins. Extreme measures should cause you no compunction." With a fastidious festure Sebastiani blanked out the screen. "The subsequent program we've discussed at length." He reached into a cabinet, brought forth a battered fiber case. "Here's your kit. You're familiar with all the contents except—these." He displayed three phials, containing respectively white, yellow and brown tablets. "Vitamins, according to the label." He regarded Keith owlishly. "We call them Unpopularity Pills. Don't dose yourself, unless you want to be unpopular."

"Interesting," said Keith. "How do they work?"

"They induce body odor of a most unpleasant nature. Not all peoples react identically to the same odor; there's a large degree of social training involved, hence the three colors." He chuckled at Keith's skeptical expression. "Don't underestimate these pills. Odors create a subconscious back-drop to our impressions; an offensive odor induces irritation, dislike, distrust. Notice the color of the pills: they indicate

the racial groups most strongly affected. White for Caucasians, yellow, for Chinese, brown for Negroes."

"I should think that a stench is a stench," said Keith.

Sebastiani pursed his lips didactically. "These naturally are not infallible formulations. North Chinese and South Chinese react differently, as do Laplanders, Frenchmen, Russians and Moroccans. American Negroes are culturally Caucasians. But I need say no more; I'm sure the function of the pills is clear to you. A dose persists two or three days, and the person affected is unaware of his condition." He replaced the phials in the case, and as if by after-thought brought forth a battered flashlight. "And this of course—absolutely top-secret. I marvel that you are allowed the use of it. When you press this button—a flashlight. Slip over the safety, press the button again—" he tossed the flashlight back into the case—"a death-ray. Or if you prefer, a laser, projecting red and infra-red at high intensity. If you try to open it you'll blow your arm off. Recharge by plugging into any AC socket. The era of the bullet is at an end." He snapped shut the case, rose to his feet, gave a brusque wave of his hand. "Wait in the outside office for Parrish; he'll take you to your plane. You

know your objectives. This is a desperate business, a fool-hardy business. You must like it or you'd have a job in the post office."

At Latitude 6° 34" N, Longitude 13° 30" W, the plane made sunrise rendezvous with a wallowing black submarine. Keith drifted down on a jigger consisting of a seat, a small engine, four whirling blades. The submarine submerged with Keith aboard, surfaced twenty-three hours later to set him afloat in a sailing canoe, and once more submerged.

Keith was alone on the South Atlantic. Dawn ringed the horizon, and there to the east lay the dark mass of Africa. Keith trimmed his sail to the breeze and wake foamed up astern.

Daybreak illuminated a barren sandy coast, on which a few fishermen's huts could be seen. To the north, under wads of black-green foliage, the white buildings of Dasai gleamed. Keith drove his canoe up on the beach, plodded across sand dunes to the coast highway.

There was already considerable traffic abroad: women trudging beside donkeys, young men riding bicycles, an occasional small automobile of antique vintage, once an expensive new Amphitrite Air-Boat slid past on its air-cushion, with a soft whirped *whoosh*.

At nine o'clock, crossing the sluggish brown Dasa River, he entered Dasai, a small sun-dazzled coastal port, as yet untouched by the changes which had transformed Fejo. Two- and three-storied buildings of white stucco, with arcades below, lined the main street, and a strip planted with palms, rhododendrons and oleanders ran down the middle. There were two hotels, a bank, a garage, miscellaneous shops and office buildings. A dispirited police officer in a white helmet directed traffic: at the moment two camels led by a ragged Bedouin. A squat pedestal supported four large photographs of Adoui Shgawe, the "Beloved Premier of our Nation, the Great Beacon of Africa". Below, conspicuously smaller, were photographs of Marx, Lenin, and Mao Tse-Tung.

Keith turned into a side street, walked to the river-bank. He saw ramshackle docks, a half-dozen restaurants, beer-gardens and cabarets built over the water on platforms and shaded by palm-thatched roofs. He beckoned to a nearby boy, who approached cautiously. "When the launch comes down the river from Kotoba, where does it land?"

The boy pointed a thin crooked finger. "That is the dock, sir, just beyond the Hollywood Café."

"And when is the launch due to arrive?"

"That I do not know, sir."

Keith flipped the boy a coin and made his way to the dock, where he learned that indeed the river-boat from Kotoba would arrive definitely at two P.M., certainly no later than three, beyond any question of doubt by four.

Keith considered. If Tamba Ngasi should arrive at two or even three he would probably press on to Fejo, sixty miles down the coast. If the boat were late he might well decide to stay in Dasai for the night—there at the Grand Plaisir Hotel, only a few steps away.

The question: where to intercept Tamba Ngasi? Here in Dasai? At the Grand Plaisir Hotel? En route to Fejo?

**N**ONE of these possibilities appealed to Keith. He returned to the main street. A tobacconist assured him that no automobiles could be hired except one of the town's three ancient taxicabs. He pointed up the street to an old black Citroen standing in the shade of an enormous sapodilla. The driver, a thin old man in white shorts, a faded blue shirt and canvas shoes, lounged beside a booth which sold crushed ice and syrup. The proprietress, a large woman in brilliant black, gold and orange gown prodded him with her fly-whisk, directing his attention to Keith. He moved reluctantly across the sidewalk.

"The gentleman wishes to be conveyed to a destination?"

Keith, in the role of the back-country barbarian, pulled at his long chin dubiously. "I will try your vehicle, provided you do not try to cheat me."

"The rates are definite," said the driver, unenthusiastically. "Three rupiahs for the first meter, one rupiah per meter thereafter. Where do you wish to go?"

Keith entered the cab. "Drive up the river road."

They rattled out of town, along a dirt road which kept generally to the banks of the river. The countryside was dusty and barren, grown over with thorn, with here and there a massive baobab. The miles passed and the driver became nervous. "Where does the gentleman intend to go?"

"Stop here," said Keith. The driver uncertainly slowed the cab. Keith brought money from the leather pouch at his belt. "I wish to drive the cab. Alone. You may wait for me under that tree." The driver protested vehemently. Keith pressed a hundred rupiahs upon him. "Do not argue; you have no choice. I may be gone several hours, but you shall have your cab back safely and another hundred rupiahs—if you wait here."

The driver alighted and limped through the dust to the shade of the tall yellow gum tree and Keith drove off up the road.

The country became more pleasant. Palm trees lined the riverbank; there were occasional garden-patches, and he passed three villages of round mud-wall huts with conical thatched roofs. Occasionally canoes moved across the dull brown water, and he saw a barge stacked with cord-wood, towed by what seemed a ridiculously inadequate row-boat with an outboard motor. He drove another ten miles and the country once more became inhospitable. The river, glazed by heat, wound between mud-banks where small crocodiles basked; the shores were choked with papyrus and larch thickets. Keith stopped the car, consulted a map. The first town of any consequence where the boat might be expected to discharge passengers, was Mbakouesse, another twenty-five miles—too far.

Replacing the map in his suitcase, Keith brought out a jar containing brilliantine, or so the label implied. He considered it a moment, and arrived at a plan of action.

HE now drove slowly and presently found a spot where the channel swung close in under the bank. Keith parked beside a towering clump of red-jointed bamboo and made his preparations. He wadded a few ounces of the waxy so-called brilliantine around a strangely heavy loz-

enge from a box of cough drops, taped the mass to a dry stick of wood. He found a spool of fine cord, tied a rock to the end, unwound twenty feet, tied on the stick. Then, wary of adders, crocodiles, and the enormous clicking-wing wasps which lived in burrows along the river-bank, he made his way through the larches to the shore of the river. Unreeling a hundred feet of cord, he flung stick and stone as far across the river as possible. The stone sank to the bottom, mooring the stick which now floated at the far edge of the channel, exactly where Keith had intended.

An hour passed, two hours. Keith sat in the shade of the larches, surrounded by the resinous odor of the leaves, the swampy reek of the river. At last: the throb of a heavy diesel engine. Down the river came a typical boat of the African rivers. About seventy feet long, with first-class cabins on the upper deck, second-class cubicles on the main deck, the remainder of the passengers sitting, standing, crouching or huddling wherever room offered itself.

The boat approached, chugging down the center of the channel. Keith gathered in the slack of the cord, drew the stick closer. On the top deck stood a tall gaunt man, his face dark, feral and clever under a *darshba* tur-

ban: Tamba Ngasi? Keith was uncertain. This man walked with head bent forward, elbows jutting at a sharp angle. Keith had studied photographs of Tamba Ngasi, but confronted by the living individual . . . There was no time for speculation. The boat was almost abreast, the bow battering up a transparent yellow bow-wave. Keith drew in the cord, pulled the stick under the bow. He held up the palm of his right hand, in which lay coiled a directional antenna. He spread his fingers, an impulse struck out to the detonator in the little black lozenge. A dull booming explosion, a gout of foam, sheets of brown water, shrill cries of surprise and fear. The boat nosed down into the water, swerved erratically.

Keith pulled back and rewound what remained of his cord.

The boat, already overloaded, was about to sink. It swung toward the shore, ran aground fifty yards down-stream.

Keith backed the taxi out of the larches, drove a half-mile up the road, waited, watching through binoculars.

A straggle of white-robed men and women came through the larches and presently a tall man in a *darshba* turban strode angrily out on the road. Keith focused the binoculars: there were the features he himself now wore. The posture, the stride seemed

more angular, more nervous; he must remember to duplicate these mannerisms . . . Now, to work. He pulled the hood of his cloak forward to conceal his face, shifted into gear. The taxi approached the knot of people standing by the roadside. A portly olive-skinned man in European whites sprang out, flagged him to a stop. Keith looked out in simulated surprise.

Keith shrugged. "I have a fare; I am going now to pick him up."

TAMBA Ngasi came striding up. He flung open the door. "The fare can wait. I am a government official. Take me to Dasa-i."

The portly little Hindu made a motion as if he would likewise seek to enter the cab. Keith stopped him. "I have room only for one." Tamba Ngasi threw his suitcase into the cab, leapt in. Keith moved off, leaving the group staring disconsolately after him.

"An insane accident," Tamba Ngasi complained peevishly. "We ride along quietly; the boat strikes a rock; it seems like an explosion, and we sink! Can you imagine that? And I, an important member of the government, riding aboard! Why are you stopping?"

"I must see to my other fare." Keith turned off the road, along

a faint track leading into the scrub.

"No matter about your other fare, I wish no delay. Drive on."

"I must also pick up a can of petrol, otherwise we will run short."

"Petrol, here, out in the thorn bushes?"

"A cache known only to the taxi drivers." Keith halted, alighted, opened the rear door. "Tamba Ngasi, come forth."

Tamba Ngasi stared under Keith's hood into his own face. He spit out a passionate expletive, clawed for the dagger at his waist. Keith lunged, tapped him on the forehead with his copper-silver fingernails. Electricity burst in a killing gush through Ngasi's brain; he staggered sideways and fell into the road.

Keith dragged the corpse off the track, out into the scrub. Tamba Ngasi's legs were heavy and thick, out of proportion to his sinewy torso. This was a peculiarity of which Keith had been ignorant. But no matter; who would ever know that Keith's shanks were long and lean?

Jackals and vultures would speedily dispose of the corpse.

Keith transferred the contents of the pouch to his own, sought but found no money-belt. He returned to the taxi, drove back to the tall gum tree. The driver lay asleep; Keith woke him with a blast of the horn. "Hurry now,

take me back to Dasai, I must be in Fejo before nightfall."

IN ALL of Africa, ancient, medieval and modern, there never had been a city like Fejo. It rose on a barren headland north of Tabacounda Bay, where twenty years before not even fishermen had deigned to live. Fejo was a bold city, startling in its shapes, textures and colors. Africans determined to express their unique African heritage had planned the city, rejecting absolutely the architectural traditions of Europe and America, both classical and contemporary. Construction had been financed by a gigantic loan from the U.S.S.R., Soviet engineers had translated the sketches of fervent Lakhadi students into space and solidity.

Fejo, therefore, was a remarkable city. Certain European critics dismissed it as a stage-setting: some were fascinated, others repelled. No one denied that Fejo was compellingly dramatic. "In contrast to the impact of Fejo, Brasilia seems sterile, eclectic, prettified," wrote an English critic. "Insane fantasies, at which Gaudi himself might be appalled," snapped a Spaniard. "Fejo is the defiant challenge of African genius, and its excesses are those of passion, rather than of style," declared an Italian. "Fejo," wrote a Frenchman, "is

hideous, startling, convoluted, pretentious, ignorant, oppressive, and noteworthy only for the tortured forms to which good building material has been put."

Fejo centered on the fifty-story spire of the Institute of Africa. Nearby stood the Grand Parliament, held aloft on copper arches, with oval windows and a blue-enamelled roof like a broad-brimmed derby hat. Six tall warriors of polished basalt, representing the six principal tribes of Lakhadi fronted a plaza and beyond, the Hotel des Tropiques, the most magnificent in Africa, and ranking with any in the world. The Hotel des Tropiques was perhaps the most conventional building of the central complex, but even here the architects had insisted on pure African style. Vegetation from the roof-garden trailed down the white and blue walls; the lobby was furnished in *padauk*, teak and ebony; columns of structural glass rose from silver-blue carpets and purple-red rugs to support a ceiling of stainless steel and black enamel.

At the far end of the plaza stood the official palace, and beyond, the first three of a projected dozen apartment buildings, intended for the use of high officials. Of all the buildings in Fejo, these had been most favorably received by foreign critics, possibly because of their

simplicity. Each floor consisted of a separate disk twelve feet in height, and was supported completely apart from the floors above and below by four stanchions piercing the disks. Each disk also served as a wide airy deck, and the top deck functioned as a heliport.

ON the other side of the Hotel des Tropiques spread another plaza, to satisfy the African need for a bazaar. Here were booths, hawkers, and entertainers of every sort, selling auto-chron wrist-watches powered and synchronized by 60-cycle pulse originating in Greenwich, as well as jujus, elixirs, potions and talismans.

Through the plaza moved a cheerful and volatile mixture of people: negro women in magnificently printed cottons, silks and gauzes, Mohammedans in white *djellabas*, Tuaregs and Mauretanian Blue Men, Chinese in fusty black suits, ubiquitous Hindu shopkeepers, an occasional Russian grim and aloof from the crowd. Beyond this plaza lay a district of stark white three-story apartment cubicles. The people looking from the windows seemed irresolute and uncertain, as if the shift from mud and thatch to glass, tile, and air-conditioning were too great to be encompassed in a lifetime.

Into Fejo, at five in the after-

noon, came James Keith, riding first class on the train from Dassai. From the terminal he marched across the bazaar to the Hotel des Tropiques, strode to the desk, brushed aside a number of persons who stood waiting, pounded his fist to attract the clerk, a pale Eurasian who looked around in annoyance. "Quick!" snapped Keith, "Is it fitting that a Parliamentarian waits at the pleasure of such as you? Conduct me to my suite."

The clerk's manner altered. "Your name, sir?"

"I am Tamba Ngasi."

"There is no reservation, Comrade Ngasi. Did you—"

Keith fixed the man with a glare of outrage. "I am a Parliamentarian of the State. I need no reservation."

"But all the suites are occupied!"

"Turn someone out, and quickly."

"Yes, Comrade Ngasi. At once."

Keith found himself in a sumptuous set of rooms furnished in carved woods, green glass, heavy rugs. He had not eaten since early morning; a touch on a button flashed the restaurant menu on a screen. No reason why a tribal chieftain should not enjoy European cuisine, thought Keith, and he ordered accordingly. Awaiting his lunch he inspected walls, floor,

drapes, ceiling, furniture. Spy cells might or might not be standard equipment here in intrigue-ridden Fejo. They were not apparent, nor did he expect them to be. The best of modern equipment was dependably undetectable.

He stepped out on the deck, pushed with his tongue against one of his teeth, spoke in a whisper for several minutes. He returned the switch to its former position, and his message was broadcast in a hundredth-second coded burst indistinguishable from static. A thousand miles overhead hung a satellite, rotating with the Earth; it caught the signal, amplified and rebroadcast it to Washington.

Keith waited, and minutes passed, as many as were required to play back his message, and frame a reply. Then came the almost imperceptible click marking the arrival of the return message. It communicated itself in the voice of Sebastiani by way of Keith's jaw-bone to his auditory nerve, soundlessly, but with all of Sebastiani's characteristic inflections.

"So far so good," said Sebastiani. "But I've got some bad news. Don't try to make contact with Corty. Apparently he's been apprehended and brain-washed by the Chinese. So you're on your own."

KEITH grunted glumly, returned to the sitting room. His lunch was served; he ate, then he opened the case he had taken from Tamba Ngasi. It was similar to his own, even to the contents: clean linen, toilet articles, personal effects, a file of documents. The documents, printed in florid New African type, were of no particular interest: a poll list, various official notifications. Keith found a directive which read, ". . . When you arrive in Fejo, you will take up lodgings at Rue Arsabatte 453, where a suitable suite has been prepared for you. Please announce your presence to the Chief Clerk of Parliament as soon as possible."

Keith smiled faintly. He would simply declare that he preferred the Hotel des Tropiques. And who would question the whim of a notoriously ill-tempered back-country chieftain?

Replacing the contents of Tamba Ngasi's suitcase, Keith became aware of something peculiar. The objects felt—strange. This fetish-box for instance—just a half-ounce too heavy. Keith's mind raced along a whole network of speculations. This rather battered ball-point pencil . . . He inspected it closely, pointed it away from himself, pressed the extensor-button. A click, a hiss, a spit of cloudy gas. Keith jerked back, moved across

the room. It was a miniature gas-gun, designed to puff a drug into and through the pores of the skin. Confirmation for his suspicions—and in what a strange direction they led!

Keith replaced the pencil, closed the suitcase. He paced thoughtfully back and forth a moment or two, then locked his own suitcase and left the room.

He rode down to the lobby on a twinkling escalator of pink and green crystal, stood for a moment surveying the scene. He had expected nothing so splendid; how, he wondered, would Tamba Ngasi have regarded this glittering room and its hypersophisticated guests? Not with approval, Keith decided. He walked to the entrance, twisting his face into a leer of disgust. Even by his own tastes, the Hotel des Tropiques seemed overrich, a trifle too fanciful.

He crossed the plaza, marched along the Avenue of the Six Black Warriors to the grotesque but oddly impressive Grand Parliament of Lakhadi. A pair of glossy black guards, wearing metal sandals and greaves, pleated kirtles of white leather, sprang out, crossed spears in front of him.

Keith inspected them haughtily. "I am Tamba Ngasi, Grand Parliamentarian from Kotoba Province."

The guards twitched not a

muscle; they might have been carved of ebony. From a side cubicle came a short fat white man in limp brown slacks and shirt. He barked, "Tamba Ngasi. Guards, admit!"

The guards with a single movement sprang back across the floor. The little fat man bowed politely, but it seemed as if his gaze never veered from Keith. "You have come to register, Sir Parliamentarian?"

"Precisely. With the Chief Clerk."

The fat man bowed his head again. "I am Vasif Doutoufsky, Chief Clerk. Will you step into my office?"

DOUTOUFSKY'S office was hot and stuffy and smelled sweet of rose incense. Doutoufsky offered Keith a cup of tea. Keith gave Tamba Ngasi's characteristic brusque shake, Doutoufsky appeared faintly surprised. He spoke in Russian. "Why did you not go to Rue Ar-sabatte? I awaited you there until ten minutes ago."

Keith's mind spun as if on ball-bearings. He said gruffly, in his own not-too-facile Russian. "I had my reasons . . . There was an accident to the riverboat, possibly an explosion. I hailed a taxi, and so arrived at Dasai."

"Aha," said Doutoufsky in a soft voice. "Do you suspect interference?"

"If so," said Keith, "it could only come from one source."

"Aha," said Doutoufsky again, even more softly. "You mean—"

"The Chinese."

Doutoufsky regarded Keith thoughtfully. "The transformation has been done well," he said. "Your skin is precisely correct, with convincing tones and shadings. You speak rather oddly."

"As might you, if your head were crammed with as much as mine."

Doutoufsky pursed his lips, as if at a secret joke. "You will change to Rue Arsabatte?"

Keith hesitated, trying to sense Doutoufsky's relationship to himself: inferior or superior? Inferior, probably, with the powers and prerogatives of the contact, from whom came instructions and from whom, back to the Kremlin, went evaluations. A chilling thought: Doutoufsky and he who had walked in the guise of Tamba Ngasi might both be renegade Russians, both Chinese agents in this most fantastic of all wars. In which case Keith's life was even more precarious than it had been a half-hour previous . . . But this was the hypothesis of smaller probability. Keith said in a voice of authority, "An automobile has been placed at my disposal?"

Doutoufsky blinked. "To my knowledge, no."

"I will require an automobile."

said Keith. "Where is your car?"

"Surely, sir, this is not in character?"

"I am to be the judge of that."

Doutoufsky heaved a sigh. "I will call out one of the Parliamentary limousines."

"Which, no doubt, is efficiently monitored."

"Naturally."

"I prefer a vehicle in which I can transact such business as necessary without fear of witnesses."

Doutoufsky nodded abruptly. "Very well." He tossed a key to the table of his desk. "This is my own Aerofloat. Please use it discreetly."

"This car is not monitored?"

"Definitely not."

"I will check it intensively nonetheless." Keith spoke in a tone of quiet menace. "I hope to find it as you describe."

Doutoufsky blinked, and in a subdued voice explained where the car might be found. "Tomorrow at noon Parliament convenes. You are naturally aware of this."

"Naturally. Are there supplementary instructions?"

Doutoufsky gave Keith a dry side-glance. "I was wondering when you would ask for them, since this was specified as the sole occasion for our contact. Not to hector, not to demand pleasure-cars."

"Contain your arrogance, Va-

sif Doutoufsky. I must work without interference. Certain slight doubts regarding your ability already exist; spare me the necessity of corroborating them."

"Aha," said Doutoufsky softly. He reached in his drawer, tossed a small iron nail down upon the desk. "Here are your instructions. You have the key to my car, you have refused to use your designated lodgings. Do you require anything further?"

"Yes," said Keith, grinning wolfishly. "Funds."

Doutoufsky tossed a packet of *rupiah* notes on the desk. "This should suffice until our next contact."

Keith rose slowly to his feet. There would be difficulties if he failed to make prearranged contacts with Doutoufsky. "Certain circumstances may make it necessary to change the routine."

"Indeed? Such as?"

"I have learned—from a source which I am not authorized to reveal—that the Chinese have apprehended and brain-washed an agent of the West. He was detected by the periodicity of his actions. It is better to make no precise plans."

Doutoufsky nodded soberly. "There is something in what you say."

BY moonlight the coast road from Fejo to Dasai was

beautiful beyond imagination. To the left spread an endless expanse of sea, surf and wan desolate sand; to the right grew thorn-bush, baobabs, wire cactus—angular patterns in every tone of silver, gray and black.

Keith felt reasonably sure that he had not been followed. He had carefully washed the car with the radiation from his flashlight, to destroy a spy-cell's delicate circuits by the induced currents. Halfway to Dasai he braked to a halt, extinguished his lights, searched the sky with the radar in his ear-amulets. He could detect nothing; the air was clear and desolate, nor did he sense any car behind him. He took occasion to despatch a message to the hovering satellite. There was a five minute wait; then the relay clicked home. Sebastiani's voice came clear and distinct into his brain: "The coincidence, upon consideration, is not astonishing. The Russians selected Tamba Ngasi for the same reasons we did: his reputation for aggressiveness and independence, his presumable popularity with the military, as opposed to their suspicion of Shgawe."

"As to the Arsabatte address, I feel you have made the correct decision. You'll be less exposed at the hotel. We have nothing definite on Doutoufsky. He is ostensibly a Polish emigrant, now a Lakhadi citizen. You may have

overplayed your hand taking so strong an attitude. If he seeks you out, show a degree of contrition and remark that you have been instructed to cooperate more closely with him."

Keith searched the sky once more, but received only a signal from a low-flying owl. Confidently he continued along the unreal road, and presently arrived at Dasai.

The town was quiet, with only a sprinkling of street-lights, a tinkle of music and laughter from the cabarets. Keith turned along the river-road and proceeded inland.

The country became wild and forlorn. Twenty miles passed; Keith drove slowly. Here, the yellow gum tree where he had discharged the taxi-driver. Here, where he had grounded the river-boat. He swung around, returned down the road. Here—where he had driven off the road with the man he had thought to be Tamba Ngasi. He turned, drove a space, then stopped, got out of the car. Off in the brush a dozen yellow eyes reflected back his headlights, then swiftly retreated.

THE jackals had been busy with the body. Three of them lay dead, mounds of rancid fur, and Keith was at a loss to account for their condition. He played his flashlight up and down the corpse, inspected the

flesh at which the jackals had been tearing. He bent closer, frowning in puzzlement. A peculiar pad of specialized tissue lay along the outside of the thighs, almost an inch thick. It was organized in orderly strips and fed plentifully from large arteries, and here and there Keith detected the glint of metal. Suddenly he guessed the nature of the tissue and knew why the jackals lay dead. He straightened up, looked around through the moon-drenched forest of cactus and thorn-scrub and shivered. The presence of death alone was awesome, the more so for the kind of man who lay here so far from his home, so strangely altered and augmented. Those pads of gray flesh must be electro-organic tissue, similar to that of the electric eel, somehow adapted to human flesh by Russian biologists. Keith felt a sense of oppression. How far they exceed us! he thought. My power source is chemical, inorganic; that of this man was controlled by the functioning of his body, and remained at so high a potential that three jackals had been electrocuted tearing into it.

Gritting his teeth he bent over the corpse, and set about his examination.

Half an hour later he had finished, and stood erect with two films of semi-metalloid peeled from the inside of the corpse's

cheeks: communication circuits certainly as sophisticated as his own.

He scrubbed his hands in the sand, returned to the car and drove back into the setting moon. He came to the dark town of Dassai, turned south along the coast road, and an hour later returned to Fejo.

The lobby of the Hotel des Tropiques was now illuminated only by great pale green and blue globes. A few groups sat talking and sipping drinks; to the hushed mutter of their conversation Keith crossed to the escalator, was conveyed to his room.

He entered with caution. Everything seemed in order. The two cases had not been tampered with; the bed had been turned back, pajamas of purple silk had been provided for him.

Before he slept, Keith touched another switch in his dentures, and the radar mounted guard. Any movement within the room would awaken. He was temporarily secure; he slept.

**A**N hour before the first session of the Grand Parliament Keith sought out Vasif Doutoufsky, who compressed his mouth into a pink rosette. "Please. It is not suitable that we seem intimate acquaintances."

Keith grinned his vulpine unpleasant grin. "No fear of that." He displayed the devices he had

taken from the body of the so-called Tamba Ngasi. Doutoufsky peered curiously.

"These are communication circuits." Keith tossed them to the desk. "They have failed, and I cannot submit my reports. You must do this for me, and relay my instructions."

Doutoufsky shook his head. "This was not to be my function. I cannot compromise myself; the Chinese already suspect my reports."

Ha, thought Keith, Doutoufsky functioned as a double-agent. The Russians seemed to trust him, which Keith considered somewhat naive. He ruminated a moment, then reaching in his pouch brought forth a flat tin. He opened it, extracted a small woody object resembling a clove. He dropped it in front of Doutoufsky. "Eat this."

Doutoufsky looked up slowly, brow wrinkled in plaintive protest. "You are acting very strangely. Of course I shall not eat this object. What is it?"

"It is a tie which binds our lives together," said Keith. "If I am killed, one of my organs broadcasts a pulse which will detonate this object."

"You are mad," muttered Doutoufsky. "I shall make a report to this effect."

Keith moved forward, laid his hand on Doutoufsky's shoulder, touched his neck. "Are you aware



that I can cause your heart to stop?" He sent a trickle of electricity into his copper-silver fingernails.

Doutoufsky seemed more puzzled than alarmed. Keith emitted a stronger current, enough to make any man wince. Doutoufsky merely reached up to disengage Keith's arm. His fingers clamped on Keith's wrist. They were cold, and clamped like steel tongs. And into Keith's arm came a hurting surge of current.

"You are an idiot," said Doutoufsky in disgust. "I carry weapons you know nothing about. Leave me at once, or you will regret it."

Keith departed, sick with dismay. Doutoufsky was augmented. His rotundity no doubt concealed great slabs of electro-generative tissue. He had blundered; he had made a fool of himself.

A GONG rang; other Parliamentarians filed past him. Keith took a deep breath, swaggered into the echoing red, gold, and black paneled hall. A doorkeeper saluted. "Name, sir?"

"Tamba Ngasi, Kotoba Province."

"Your seat, Excellency, is Number 27."

Keith seated himself, listened without interest to the invocation. What to do about Doutoufsky?

His ruminations were interrupted by the appearance on the rostrum of a heavy moon-faced man in a simple white robe. His skin was almost blue-black, the eyelids hung lazily across his protuberant eyeballs, his mouth was wide and heavy. Keith recognized Adoui Shgawe, Premier of Lakhadi, Benefactor of Africa.

He spoke resonantly, in generalities and platitudes, with many references to Socialist Solidarity. "The future of Lakhadi is the future of Black Africa! As we look through this magnificent chamber and note the colors of the tasteful decoration, can we not fail to be impressed by the correctness of the symbolism? Red is the color of blood, which is the same for all men, and also the color of International Socialism. Black is the color of our skins, and it is our prideful duty to ensure that the energy and genius of our race is respected around the globe. Gold is the color of success, of glory, and of progress; and golden is the future of Lakhadi!"

The chamber reverberated with applause.

Shgawe turned to more immediate problems. "While spiritually rich, we are in certain ways impoverished. Comrade Nambe Faranah—" he nodded toward a squat square-faced man in a black suit "—has presented an interesting program. He sug-

gests that a carefully scheduled program of immigration might provide us a valuable new national asset. On the other hand

"

Comrade Nambe Faranah bounded to his feet and turned to face the assembly. Shgawe held up a restraining hand, but Faranah ignored him. "I have conferred with Ambassador Hsia Lu-Minh of our comrade nation, the Chinese People's Democracy. He has made the most valuable assurances, and will use all his influence to help us. He agrees that a certain number of skilled agricultural technicians can immeasurably benefit our people, and can accelerate the political orientation of the non-political back-regions. Forward to progress!" bellowed Faranah. "Hail the mighty advance of the colored races, arm in arm, united under the red banner of International Socialism!" He looked expectantly around the hall for applause, which came only in a perfunctory spatter. He sat down abruptly. Keith studied him with a new somber speculation. Comrade Faranah—an augmented Chinese?

Adoui Shgawe had placidly continued his address. "—some have questioned the practicality of this move," he was saying. "Friends and comrades, I assure you that no matter how loyal and comradely our brother nations,

they cannot provide us prestige! The more we rely on them for leadership, the more we diminish our own stature among the nations of Africa."

Nambey Faranah held up a quivering finger. "Not completely correct, Comrade Shgawe!"

Shgawe ignored him. "For this reason I have purchased eighteen American weapons. Admittedly they are cumbersome and outmoded. But they are still terrible instruments—and they command respect. With eighteen intercontinental missiles poised against any attack, we consolidate our position as the leaders of black Africa."

There was another spatter of applause. Adoui Shgawe leaned forward, gazed blandly over the assembly. "That concludes my address. I will answer questions from the floor. . . . Ah, Comrade Bouassede."

**C**OMRADE Bouassede, a fragile old man with a fine fluffy white beard, rose to his feet. "All very fine, these great weapons, but against whom do we wish to use them? What good are they to us, who know nothing of such things?"

Shgawe nodded with vast benevolence. "A wise question, Comrade. I can only answer that one never knows from which direction some insane militarism may strike."

Faranah leapt to his feet.  
"May I answer the question,  
Comrade Shgawe?"

"The assembly will listen to  
your opinions with respect,"  
Shgawe declared courteously.

Faranah turned toward old  
Bouassede. "The imperialists are  
at bay, they cower in their rotting  
strongholds, but still they can  
muster strength for one final fe-  
verish lunge, should they see a  
chance to profit."

Shgawe said, "Comrade Faranah  
has expressed himself with  
his customary untiring zeal"

"Are not these devices com-  
pletely beyond our capacity to  
maintain?" demanded Bouas-  
sede.

Shgawe nodded. "We live in a  
swiftly changing environment.  
At the moment this is the case.  
But until we are able to act for  
ourselves, our Russian allies have  
offered many valuable services.  
They will bring great suction  
dredges, and will station the  
launching tubes in the tidal  
sands off our coast. They have  
also undertaken to provide us a  
specially designed ship to sup-  
ply liquid oxygen and fuel."

"This is all nonsense," growled  
Bouassede. "We must pay for  
this ship; it is not a gift. The  
money could be better spent  
building roads and buying cat-  
tle."

"Comrade Bouassede has not  
considered the intangible factors

involved," declared Shgawe equa-  
bly. "Ah, Comrade Maguemi.  
Your question, please."

Comrade Maguemi was a ser-  
ious bespectacled young man in a  
black suit. "Exactly how many  
Chinese immigrants are envi-  
sioned?"

Shgawe looked from the corner  
of his eye toward Faranah. "The  
proposal so far is purely theoreti-  
cal, and probably—"

Faranah jumped to his feet.  
"It is a program of great urgen-  
cy. However many Chinese are  
needed, we shall welcome them."

"This does not answer my  
question," Maguemi persisted  
coldly. "A hundred actual tech-  
nicians might in fact be useful.  
A hundred thousand peasants, a  
colony of aliens in our midst,  
could only bring us harm."

Shgawe nodded gravely. "Com-  
rade Maguemi has illuminated a  
very serious difficulty."

"By no means," cried Faranah.  
"Comrade Maguemi's premises  
are incorrect. A hundred, a hun-  
dred thousand, a million, ten  
million—what is the difference?  
We are Communists together,  
striving toward a common goal!"

"I do not agree," shouted Mag-  
uemi. "We must avoid doctri-  
naire solutions to our problems.  
If we are submerged in the Asi-  
atic tide, our voices will be  
drowned."

Another young man, thin as a  
starved bird, with a thin face and

blade-like nose, sprang up. "Comrade Maguemi has no sense of historical projection. He ignores the teachings of Marx, Lenin, and Mao. A true Communist takes no heed of race or geography."

"I am no true Communist," declared Maguemi coldly. "I have never made such a humiliating admission. I consider the teachings of Marx, Lenin and Mao even more obsolete than the American weapons with which Comrade Shgawe has unwisely burdened us."

Adoui Shgawe smiled broadly. "We may safely pass on from the subject of Chinese immigration, as in all likelihood it will never occur. A few hundred technicians, as Comrade Maguemi suggests, of course will be welcome. A more extended program would certainly lead to difficulties."

Nambey Faranah glowered at the floor.

Shgawe spoke on, in a soothing voice, and presently adjourned the Parliament for two days.

Keith returned to his room at the *des Tropiques*, settled himself on the couch, considered his position. He could feel no satisfaction in his performance to date. He had blundered seriously with Doutoufsky, might well have aroused his suspicions. There was certainly small reason for optimism.

TWO days later Adoui Shgawe reappeared in the Grand Chamber, to speak on a routine matter connected with the state-operated cannery. Nambey Faranah could not resist a sardonic jibe: "At last we perceive a use for the cast-off American missile-docks: they can easily be converted into fish-processing plants, and we can shoot the wastes into space."

Shgawe held up his hands against the mutter of appreciative laughter. "This is no more than stupidity; I have explained the importance of these weapons. Persons inexperienced in such matters should not criticize them."

Faranah was not to be subdued so easily. "How can we be anything other than inexperienced? We know nothing of these American cast-offs, they float unseen in the ocean. Do they even exist?"

Shgawe shook his head in pitying disgust. "Are there no extremes to which you will not go? The docks are at hand for any and all to inspect. Tomorrow I will order the *Lumumba* out, and I now request the entire membership to make a trip of inspection. There will be no further excuse for skepticism—if, indeed, there is now."

Faranah was silenced. He gave a petulant shrug, settled back into his seat.

Almost two-thirds of the chamber responded to Shgawe's invitation, and on the following morning, trooped aboard the single warship of the Lakhadi navy, an ancient French destroyer. Bells clanged, whistles sounded, water churned up aft and the *Lumumba* eased out of Tabacoundi Bay, to swing south over long blue swells.

Twenty miles the destroyer cruised, paralleling the wind-beaten shore; then at the horizon appeared seventeen pale humps—the floating missile silos. But the *Lumumba* veered in toward shore, where the eighteenth of the docks had been raised on buoyancy tanks, floated in toward the beach, lowered to the sub-tidal sand. Alongside was moored a Russian dredge which pumped jets of water below the silo, dislodging sand and allowing the dock to settle.

The Parliamentarians stood on the *Lumumba*'s foredeck, staring at the admittedly impressive cylinder. All were forced to agree that the docks existed. Premier Shgawe came out on the wing of the bridge, with beside him the Grand Marshal of the Army, Achille Hashembe, a hard-bitten man of sixty, with close-cropped gray hair. While Shgawe addressed the Parliamentarians Hashembe scrutinized them carefully, first one face, then another.

THE helicopter assigned to this particular dock is under repair," said Shgawe. "It will be inconvenient to inspect the missile itself. But no matter; our imaginations will serve us. Picture eighteen of these great weapons ranged at intervals along the shores of our fatherland; can a more impressive defense be conceived?"

Keith, standing near Faranah heard him mutter to those near at hand. Keith watched with great attention. Two hours previously, stewards had served small cups of black coffee, and Keith, stationing himself four places above Faranah had dropped an Unpopularity Pill into the fourth cup. The steward passed along the line; each intervening Parliamentarian took a cup and Faranah received the cup with the pill. Now Faranah's audience regarded him with fastidious distaste and moved away. A whiff of odor reached Keith himself: American biochemists, he thought, had wrought effectively. Faranah smelled very poorly indeed. And Faranah glared about in bafflement.

The *Lumumba* circled the dock slowly, which now had reached a permanent bed in the sand. Aboard the dredge the Russian engineers were disengaging the pumps, preparatory to performing the same operation upon a second dock.

A steward approached Keith. "Adoui Shgawe wishes a word with you."

Keith followed the steward to the officers' mess, and as he entered met one of his colleagues on the way out.

Adoui Shgawe rose to his feet, bowed gravely. "Tamba Ngasi, please be seated. Will you take a glass of brandy?"

Keith shook his head brusquely: one of Ngasi's idiosyncrasies.

"You have met Grand Marshal Hashembe?" Shgawe asked politely.

Keith had been briefed as thoroughly as possible but on this point had no information. He evaded the question. "I have a high regard for the Grand Marshal's abilities."

Hashembe returned a curt nod, but said nothing.

"I take this occasion," said Shgawe, "to learn if you are sympathetic to my program, now that you have had an opportunity to observe it more closely."

Keith took a moment to reflect. In Shgawe's words lay the implication of previous disagreement. He submerged himself in the role of Tamba Ngasi, spoke with the sentiments Tamba Ngasi might be expected to entertain. "There is too much waste, too much foreign influence. We need water for the dry lands, we need medicine for the cattle. These are lacking while treasures are squandered

on the idiotic buildings of Fejo." From the corner of his eye he saw Hashembe's eyes narrow a trifle. Approval?

Shgawe answered, ponderously suave. "I respect your argument, but there is also this to be considered: the Russians lent us the money for the purpose of building Fejo into a symbol of progress. They would not allow the money to be used for less dramatic purposes. We accepted, and I feel that we have benefited. Prestige nowadays is highly important."

"Important, to whom? To what end?" grumbled Keith. "Why must we pretend to a glory which is not ours?"

"You concede defeat before the battle begins," said Shgawe more vigorously. "Unfortunately this is our African heritage, and it must be overcome."

Keith, in the role of Ngasi, said, "My home is Kotoba, at the backwaters of the Dasa, and my people live in mud huts. Is not the idea of glory for the people of Kotoba ridiculous? Give us water and cattle and medicine."

Shgawe's voice dropped in pitch. "For the people of Kotoba, I too want water and cattle and medicine. But I want more than this, and glory perhaps is a poor word to use."

HASHEMBE rose to his feet, bowed stiffly to Shgawe and

to Keith, and left the room. Shgawe shook his round head. "Hashembe cannot understand my vision. He wants me to expel the foreigners: the Russians, the French, the Hindus, especially the Chinese."

Keith rose to his feet. "I am not absolutely opposed to your views. Perhaps you have some sort of document I might read?" He took a casual step across the room. Shgawe shrugged, looked among his papers. Keith seemed to stumble and his knuckles touched the nape of Shgawe's plump neck. "Your pardon, Excellency," said Keith. "I am clumsy."

"No matter," said Shgawe. "Here: this and this—papers which explain my views for the development of Lakhadi and of the New Africa." He blinked. Keith picked up the papers, studied them. Shgawe's eyes drooped shut, as the drug which Keith had blasted through his skin began to permeate his body. A minute later he was asleep.

Keith moved quickly. Shgawe wore his hair in short oiled clusters; at the base of one of these Keith tied a black pellet no larger than a grain of rice, then stepped back to read the papers.

Hashembe returned to the room. He halted, looked from Shgawe to Keith. "He seems to have dozed off," said Keith and continued to read the papers.

"Adoui Shgawe!" called Hashembe. "Are you asleep?"

Shgawe's eyelids fluttered; he heaved a deep sigh, looked up. "Hashembe . . . I seem to have napped. Ah, Tamba Ngasi. Those papers, you may keep them, and I pray that you deal sympathetically with my proposals in Parliament. You are an influential man, and I depend upon your support."

"I take your words to heart, Excellency." Leaving the mess-hall Keith climbed quickly to the flying bridge. The *Lumumba* was now heading back up the coast toward Fejo. Keith touched one of his internal switches, and into his auditory channel came the voice of Shgawe: "—has changed, and on the whole become a more reasonable man. I have no evidence for this, other than what I sense in him."

Hashembe's voice sounded more faintly. "He does not seem to remember me, but many years ago when he belonged to the Leopard Society, I captured him and a dozen of his fellows at Engassa. He killed two of my men and escaped, but I bear him no grudge."

"Ngasi is a man worth careful attention," said Shgawe. "He is more subtle than he appears, and I believe, not so much of the back-country tribesman as he would have us believe."

"Possibly not," said Hashembe.

Keith switched off the connections, spoke for the encoder: "I'm aboard the *Lumumba*, we've just been out for a look at the missile docks. I've attached my No. 1 transmitter to the person of Adoui Shgawe; you'll now be picking up Shgawe's conversations. I don't dare listen in; they could detect me by the resonance. If anything interesting occurs, notify me."

He snapped back the switch; the pulse of information whisked up to the satellite and bounced down to Washington.

THE *Lumumba* entered Tabacoundi Bay, docked. Keith returned to the Hotel des Tropiques, rode the sparkling escalator to the second floor, strode along the silk and marble corridor to the door of his room. Two situations saved his life: an ingrained habit never to pass unwarily through a door, and the radar in his ear-amulets. The first keyed him to vigilance; the second hurled him aside and back, as through the spot his face had occupied flitted a shower of little glass needles. They tinkled against the far wall, fell to the floor in fragments.

Keith picked himself up, peered into the room. It was empty. He entered, closed the door. A catapult had launched the needles, a relatively simple mechanism. Someone in the ho-

tel would be on hand to observe what had happened and remove the catapult—necessarily soon.

Keith ran to the door, eased it open, looked into the corridor. Empty—but here came footsteps. Leaving the door open, Keith pressed against the wall.

The footsteps halted. Keith heard the sound of breathing. The tip of a nose appeared through the doorway; it moved inquiringly this way and that. The face came through; it turned and looked into Keith's face, almost eye to eye. The mouth opened in a gasp, then a crooked wince as Keith reached forth, grasped the neck. The mouth opened but made no sound.

Keith pulled the man into the room, shut the door. He was a mulatto, about forty years old. His cheeks were fleshy, flat, expensive, his nose a lumpy beak. Keith recognized him: Corty, his original contact in Fejo. He looked deep into the man's eyes; they were stained pink and the pupils were small; the gaze seemed leaden.

Keith sent a tingle of electricity through the rubbery body. Corty opened his mouth in agony, but failed to cry out. Keith started to speak, but Corty made a despairing sign for silence. He seized the pencil from Keith's pocket, scribbled in English: "Chinese, they have a circuit in my head, they drive me mad."

Keith stared. Corty suddenly opened his eyes wide. Yelling soundlessly he lunged for Keith's throat, clawing, tearing. Keith killed him with a gush of electricity, stood looking down at the limp body.

Heaven help the American agent who fell into Chinese hands, thought Keith. They ran wires through his brain, into the very core of the pain processes; then instructing and listening through transceivers, they could tweak, punish, or drive into frantic frenzy at will. The man was happier dead.

The Chinese had identified him. Had someone witnessed the placing of the tap on Shgawe? Or the dosing of Faranah? Or had Doutoufsky passed a broad hint? Or—the least likely possibility—did the Chinese merely wish to expunge him, as an African Isolationist?

Keith looked out into the corridor, which was untenanted. He rolled out the corpse, and then in a spirit of macabre whimsy, dragged it by the heels to the escalator, and sent it down into the lobby.

HE returned to his room in a mood of depression. North vs. East vs. South vs. West: a four-way war. Think of all the battles, campaigns, tragedies: grief beyond calculation. And to what end? The final pacification

of Earth? Improbable, thought Keith, considering the millions of years ahead. So why did he, James Keith, American citizen, masquerade as Tamba Ngasi, risking his life and wires into the pain centers of his brain? Keith pondered. The answer evidently was this: all of human history is condensed into each individual lifetime. Each man can enjoy the triumphs or suffer the defeats of all the human race. Charlemagne died a great hero, though his empire immediately split into fragments. Each man must win his personal victory, achieve his unique and selfish goal.

Otherwise, hope could not exist.

The sky over the fantastic silhouette of Fejo grew smoky purple. Colored lights twinkled in the plaza. Keith went to the window, looked off into the dreaming twilight skies. He wished no more of this business; if he fled now for home, he might escape with his life. Otherwise—he thought of Corty. In his own mind a relay clicked. The voice of Carl Sebastiani spoke soundlessly, but harsh and urgent. "Adoui Shgawe is dead—assassinated two minutes ago. The news came by your transmitter No. 1. Go to the palace, act decisively. This is a critical event."

KEITH armed himself, tested his accumulators. Sliding

back the door, he looked into the corridor. Two men in the white tunic of the Lakhadi Militia stood by the escalator. Keith stepped out, walked toward them. They became silent, watched his approach. Keith nodded with austere politeness, started to descend, but they halted him. "Sir, have you had a visitor this evening? A mulatto of early middle-age?"

"No. What is all this about?"

"We are trying to identify this man. He died under strange circumstances."

"I know nothing about him. Let me pass; I am Parliamentarian Tamba Ngasi."

The militia-men bowed politely; Keith rode the escalator down into the lobby.

He ran across the plaza, passed before the six basalt warriors, approached the front of the palace. He marched up the low steps, entered the vestibule. A doorman in a red and silver uniform, wearing a plumed head-dress with a silver nose-guard, stepped forward. "Good evening sir."

"I am Tamba Ngasi, Parliamentarian. I must see His Excellency immediately."

"I am sorry, sir, Premier Shgawe has given orders not to be disturbed this evening."

Keith pointed into the foyer. "Who then is that person?"

The doorman looked, Keith tapped him in the throat with his

knuckles, held him at the nerve junctions under the ears until he stopped struggling, then dragged him back into his cubicle. He peered into the foyer. At the reception desk sat a handsome young woman in a Polynesian *lava-lava*. Her skin was golden-brown, she wore her hair piled in a soft black pyramid.

Keith entered, the young woman smiled politely up at him.

"Premier Shgawe is expecting me," said Keith. "Where may I find him?"

"I'm sorry sir, he has just given orders that he is not to be disturbed."

"Just given orders?"

"Yes, sir."

Keith nodded judiciously. He indicated her telephone. "Be so good as to call Grand Marshal Achille Hashembe, on an urgent matter."

"Your name, sir?"

"I am Parliamentarian Tamba Ngasi. Hurry."

The girl bent to the telephone.

"Ask him to join me and the Premier Shgawe at once," Keith ordered curtly.

"But, sir—"

"Premier Shgawe is expecting me. Call Marshal Hashembe at once."

"Yes sir." She punched a button. "Grand Marshal Hashembe from the State Palace."

"Where do I find the Premier?" inquired Keith, moving past.

"He is in the second-floor drawing room, with his friends. A page will conduct you." Keith waited; better a few seconds delay than a hysterical receptionist.

THE page appeared: a lad of sixteen in a long smock of black velvet. Keith followed him up a flight of stairs to a pair of carved wooden doors. The page made as if to open the doors but Keith stopped him. "Return and wait for Grand Marshal Hashembe; bring him here at once."

The page retreated uncertainly, looking over his shoulder. Keith paid him no further heed. Gently he pressed the latch. The door was locked. Keith wadded a trifle of plastic explosive against the door jamb, attached a detonator, pressed against the wall.

*Crack!* Keith reached through the slivers, slammed the door open, stepped inside. Three startled men looked at him. One of them was Adoui Shgawe. The other two were Hsia Lu-Minh, THE Chinese Ambassador, and Vasif Doutoufsky, Chief Clerk of the Grand Lakhadi Parliament.

Doutoufsky stood with his right fist clenched and slightly advanced. On his middle finger glittered the jewel of a large ring.

Steps pounded down the corridor: the doorman and a warrior in the black leather uniform of the Raven Elite Guard.

Shgawe asked mildly, "What is the meaning of all this?"

The doorkeeper cried fiercely. "This man attacked me; he has come with an evil heart!"

"No," cried Keith in confusion. "I feared that Your Excellency was in danger; now I see that I was misinformed."

"Seriously misinformed," said Shgawe. He motioned with his fingers. "Please go."

Doutoufsky leaned over, whispered into Shgawe's ear. Keith's gaze focused on Shgawe's hand, where he also wore a heavy ring. "Tamba Ngasi, stay if you will; I wish to confer with you." He dismissed the doorkeeper and the warrior. "This man is trustworthy. You may go."

They bowed, departed. And the confusion in Keith's mind had disappeared. Shgawe started to rise to his feet, Doutoufsky sidled thoughtfully forward. Keith flung himself to the carpet; the laser beam from his flashlight slashed across Doutoufsky's face, over against Shgawe's temple. Doutoufsky croaked, clutched his burnt-out eyes; the beam from his own ring burnt a furrow up his face. Shgawe had fallen on his back. The fat body quaked, jerked and quivered. Keith struck them again with his beam and they both died. Hsia Lu-Minh, pressing against the wall stood motionless, eyes bulging in horror. Keith jumped to his feet, ran

forward. Hsia Lu-Minh made no resistance as Keith pumped anaesthetic into his neck.

Keith stood back panting, and once again the built-in radar saved his life. An impulse, not even registered by his brain, convulsed his muscles and jerked him aside. The bullet tore through his robe, grazing his skin. Another bullet sang past him. Keith saw Hashembe standing in the doorway, the bug-eyed page behind.

Hashembe took leisurely aim. "Wait," cried Keith. "I did not do this!"

**H**ASHEMBE smiled faintly, and his trigger-finger tightened. Keith dropped to the floor, slashed the laser beam down over Hashembe's wrist. The gun dropped, Hashembe stood stern, erect, numb. Keith ran forward, hurled him to the floor, seized the page, blasted anaesthetic gas into the nape of his neck, pulled him inside, slammed shut the door.

He turned to find Hashembe groping for the gun with his left hand. "Stop!" cried Keith hoarsely. "I tell you I did not do this."

"You killed Shgawe."

"This is not Shgawe." He picked up the gun. It is a Chinese agent, his face molded to look like Shgawe."

Hashembe was skeptical. "That is hard to believe." He

looked down at the corpse. "Adoui Shgawe was not as fat as this man." He bent, lifted the thick fingers, then straightened up, "This is not Adoui Shgawe!" He inspected Doutoufsky. "The Chief Clerk, a renegade Pole."

"I thought that he worked for the Russians. The mistake almost cost me my life."

"Where is Shgawe?"

Keith looked around the room. "He must be nearby."

In the bathroom they found Shgawe's corpse. A sheet of fluro-silicon plastic lined the tub, into which had been poured hydrofluoric acid from two large carboys. Shgawe's body lay on its back in the tub, already blurred, unrecognizable.

Choking from the fumes, Hashembe and Keith staggered back, slammed the door.

Hashembe's composure had departed. He tottered to a chair, nursing his wounded arm, muttered, "I understand nothing of these crimes."

Keith looked across to the limp form of the Chinese Ambassador. "Shgawe was too strong for them. Or perhaps he learned of the grand plan."

Hashembe shook his head numbly.

"The Chinese want Africa," said Keith. "It's as simple as that. Africa will support a billion Chinese. In fifty years there may well be another billion."



"If true," said Hashembe, "it is monstrous. And Shgawe, who would tolerate none of this, is dead."

"Therefore," said Keith, "we must replace Shgawe with a leader who will pursue the same goals."

"Where shall we find such a leader?"

"Here. I am such a leader. You control the army; there can be no opposition."

Hashembe sat for two minutes looking into space. Then he rose to his feet. "Very well. You are the new premier. If necessary, we shall dissolve the Parliament. In any event it is no more than a pen for cackling chickens."

THE assassination of Adoui Shgawe shocked the nation, all of Africa. When Grand Marshal Achille Hashembe appeared before the Parliament, and announced that the body had the choice either of electing Tamba Ngasi Premier of Lakhadi, or submitting to dissolution and martial law, Tamba Ngasi was elected premier without a demur.

Keith, wearing the black and gold uniform of the Lion Elite, addressed the chamber.

"In general, my policies are identical to those of Adoui Shgawe. He hoped for a strong United Africa; this is also my hope. He tried to avoid a dependence upon foreign powers, while accepting as much genuine help as was offered. This is also my policy. Adoui Shgawe loved his native land, and sought to make Lakhadi a light of inspiration to all Africa. I hope to do as well. The missile docks will be emplaced exactly as Adoui Shgawe planned, and our Lakhadi technicians will continue to learn how to operate these great devices."

Weeks passed. Keith restaffed the palace, and burned every square inch of floor, wall, ceiling, furniture and fixtures clear of spy-cells. Sebastiani had sent him three new operatives to function as liaison and provide technical advice. Keith no longer communicated directly with Sebastiani;

without this direct connection with his erstwhile superior, the distinction between James Keith and Tamba Ngasi sometimes seemed to blur.

Keith was aware of this tendency, and exercised himself against the confusion. "I have taken this man's name, his face, his personality. I must think like him, I must act like him. But I cannot be that man!" But sometimes, if he were especially tired, uncertainty plagued him. Tamba Ngasi? James Keith? Which was the real personality?

Two months passed quietly, and a third month. The calm was like the eye of a hurricane, thought Keith. Occasionally protocol required that he meet and confer with Hsia Lu-Minh, the Chinese Ambassador. During these occasions, decorum and formality prevailed; the murder of Adoui Shgawe seemed nothing more than the wisp of an unpleasant dream. "Dream", thought Keith, the word persisting. "I live a dream." In a sudden spasm of dread, he called Sebastiani. "I'm going stale, I'm losing myself."

Sebastiani's voice was cool and reasonable. "You seem to be doing the job very well."

"One of these days," said Keith gloomily, "you'll talk to me in English and I'll answer in Swahili. And then—"

"And then?" Sebastiani prompted.

"Nothing important," said Keith. *And then you'll know that when James Keith and Tamba Ngasi met in the thorn bushes beside the Dasa River, Tamba Ngasi walked away alive and jackals ate the body of James Keith.*

Sebastiani made Keith a slightly improper suggestion: "Find yourself one of those beautiful Fejo girls and work off some of your nervous energy."

Keith somberly rejected the idea. "She'd hear relays clanking and buzzing and wonder what was wooing her."

A DAY arrived when the missile docks were finally emplaced. Eighteen great concrete cylinders, washed by the Atlantic swells, stretched in a line along the Lakhadi coast. Keith ordained a national holiday to celebrate the installation, and presided at an open air banquet in the plaza before the Parliament House. Speeches continued for hours, celebrating the new grandeur of Lakhadi: "—a nation once subject to the cruel imperial yoke, and now possessed of a culture superior to any west of China!" These were the words of Hsia Lu-Minh, with a bland sidelong glance for Leon Pashenko, the Russian Ambassador.

Pashenko, in his turn, spoke

with words equally mordant. "With the aid of the Soviet Union, Lakhadi finds itself absolutely secure against the offensive maneuvers of the West. We now recommend that all technicians, except those currently employed in the training programs, be withdrawn. African manpower must shape the future of Africa!"

James Keith sat only half-listening to the voices, and without conscious formulation, into his mind came a scheme so magnificent in scope that he could only marvel. It was a policy matter; should he move without prior conference with Sebastiani? But he was Tamba Ngasi as well as James Keith. When he arose to address the gathering, Tamba Ngasi spoke.

"Comrades Pashenko and Hsia have spoken and I have listened with interest. Especially I welcome the sentiments expressed by Comrade Pashenko. The citizens of Lakhadi must perform excellently in every field, without further guidance from abroad. Except in one critical area. We still are unable to manufacture warheads for our new defense system. I therefore take this happy occasion to formally request from the Soviet Union the requisite explosive materials."

Loud applause, and now, while Hsia Lu-Minh clapped with zest, Leon Pashenko showed little en-

thusiasm. After the banquet, he called upon Keith, and made a blunt statement.

"I regret that the fixed policy of the Soviet Union is to retain control over all its nucleonic devices. We cannot accede to your request."

"A pity," said Keith.

Leon Pashenko appeared puzzled, having expected protests and argument.

"A pity, because now I must make the request of the Chinese."

Leon Pashenko pointed out the contingent dangers. "The Chinese make hard masters!"

Keith bowed the baffled Russian out of his apartment. Immediately he sent a message to the Chinese Embassy, and half an hour later Hsia Li-Minh appeared.

"The ideas expressed by Comrade Pashenko this evening seemed valuable," said Keith. "I assume you agree?"

"Wholeheartedly," declared Hsia Lu-Minh. "Naturally the program for agricultural reform we have long discussed would not come under these restraints."

"Most emphatically they would," said Keith. "However a very limited pilot program might be launched, provided that the Chinese People's Democracy supplies warheads, immediately and at once, for our eighteen missiles."

"I must communicate with my

government," said Hsia Lu-Minh.

"Please use all possible haste," said Keith, "I am impatient."

**H**SIA Lu-Minh returned the following day. "My government agrees to arm the missiles provided that the pilot program you envision consists of at least two hundred thousand agricultural technicians."

"Impossible! How can we support so large an incursion?"

The figure was finally set at one hundred thousand, with six missiles only being supplied with nucleonic warheads.

"This is an epoch-making agreement," declared Hsia Lu-Minh.

"It is the beginning of a revolutionary process," Keith agreed.

There was further wrangling about the phasing of delivery of the warheads *vis-a-vis* the arrival of the technicians, and negotiations almost broke down. Hsia Lu-Minh seemed aggrieved to find that Keith wanted actual and immediate delivery of the warheads, rather than merely a sombolic statement of intent. Keith, in his turn, experienced surprise when Hsia Lu-Minh objected to a proviso that the incoming "technicians" be granted only six-month visas marked TEMPORARY, with option of renewal at the discretion of the Lakhadi government. "How can these technicians identify them-

selves with the problems? How can they learn to love the soil which they must till?"

The difficulties were eventually ironed out; Hsia Lu-Minh took his leave. Almost at once Keith received a call from Sebastiani, who had only just learned of the projected China-Lakhadi treaty. Sebastiani's voice was cautious, tentative, probing. "I don't quite understand the rationale of this project."

When Keith was tired, the Tamba Ngasi element of his personality exerted greater influence. The voice which answered Sebastiani sounded impatient, harsh and rough to Keith himself.

"I did not plan this scheme by rationality, but by intuition."

Sebastiani's voice became even more cautious. "I fail to see any advantageous end to the business."

Keith, or Tamba Ngasi—whoever was dominant—laughed. "The Russians are leaving Lakhadi."

"The Chinese remain in control. Compared with the Chinese, the Russians are genteel conservatives.

"You make a mistake. I am in control!"

"Very well, Keith," said Sebastiani thoughtfully. "I see that we must trust your judgment."

Keith—or Tamba Ngasi—made a brusque reply, and took

himself to bed. Here the tension departed and James Keith lay staring into the dark.

A MONTH passed; two warheads were delivered by the Chinese, flown in from the processing plants at Ulan Bator. Cargo helicopters set them in place, and Keith made a triumphant address to Lakhadi, to Africa, and to the world. "From this day forward, Lakhadi, the Helm of Africa, must be granted its place in the world's counsels. We have sought power, not for the sake of power alone, but to secure for Africa the representation our people only nominally have enjoyed. The South no longer must defer to West, to North or to East!"

The first contingent of Chinese "technicians" arrived three days later: a thousand young men and women, uniformly clad in blue coveralls and white canvas shoes. They marched in disciplined platoons to buses, and were conveyed to a tent city near the lands on which they were to be settled.

On this day Leon Pashenko called to deliver a confidential memorandum from the President of the U.S.S.R. He waited while Keith glanced through the note.

"It is necessary to point out," read the note, "that the government of the U.S.S.R. adversely regards the expansion of Chinese

influence in Lakhadi, and holds itself free to take such steps as are necessary to protect the interests of the U.S.S.R."

Keith nodded slowly. He raised his eyes to Pashenko, who sat watching with a glassy thin-lipped smile. Keith punched a button, spoke into a mesh. "Send in the television cameras, I am broadcasting an important bulletin."

A crew hurriedly wheeled in equipment. Pashenko's smile became more fixed, his skin pasty.

The director made a signal to Keith. "You're on the air."

Keith looked into the lens. "Citizens of Lakhadi, and Africans. Sitting beside me is Leon Pashenko, Ambassador of the U.S.S.R. He has just now presented me with an official communication which attempts to interfere with the internal policy of Lakhadi. I take this occasion to issue a public rebuke to the Soviet Union. I declare that the government of Lakhadi will be influenced only by measures designed to benefit its citizens, and that any further interference by the Soviet Union may lead to a rupture of diplomatic relations."

Keith bowed politely to Leon Pashenko, who had sat full in view of the camera with a frozen grimace on his face. "Please accept this statement as a formal reply to your memorandum of this morning."

Without a word Pashenko rose to his feet and left the room.

MINUTES later Keith received a communication from Sebastiani. The soundless voice was sharper than ever Keith had heard it. "What the devil are you up to? Publicity? You've humiliated the Russians, perhaps finished them in Africa—but have you considered the risks? Not for yourself, not for Lakhadi, not even for Africa—but for the whole world?"

"I have not considered such risks. They do not affect Lakhadi."

Sebastiani's voice crackled with rage. "Lakhadi isn't the center of the universe merely because you've been assigned there! From now on—these are orders, mind you—make no moves without consulting me!"

"I have heard all I care to hear," said Tamba Ngasi. "Do not call me again, do not try to interfere in my plans." He clicked off the receiver, sighed, slumped back in his chair. Then he blinked, straightened up as the memory of the conversation echoed in his brain.

For a moment he thought of calling back and trying to explain, then rejected the idea. Sebastiani would think him mad for a fact—when he had merely been over-tired, over-tense. So Keith assured himself.

The following day he received a report from a Swiss technical group, and snorted in anger, though the findings were no more than he had expected.

The Chinese Ambassador unluckily chose this moment to pay a call, and was ushered into the premier's office. Round-faced, prim, brimming with affability, Hsia Lu-Minh came forward.

He takes me for a back-country chieftain, thought the man who was now entirely Tamba Ngasi—a man relentless as a crocodile, sly as a jackal, dark as the jungle.

Hsia Lu-Minh was full of gracious compliments. "How clearly you have discerned the course of the future! It is no mere truism to state that the colored races of the world share a common destiny."

"Indeed?"

"Indeed! And I carry the authorization of my government to permit the transfer of another group of skillful, highly trained workers to Lakhadi!"

"What of the remaining warheads for the missiles?"

"They will assuredly be delivered and installed on schedule."

"I have changed my mind," said Tamba Ngasi. "I want no more Chinese immigrants. I speak for all of Africa. Those already in this country must leave, and likewise the Chinese missions in Mali, Ghana, Sudan,

Angola, the Congolese Federation—in fact in all of Africa. The Chinese must leave Africa, completely and inalterably. This is an ultimatum. You have a week to agree. Otherwise Lakhadi will declare war upon the Chinese People's Republic."

Hsia Lu-Minh listened in astonishment, his mouth a doughnut of shock. "You are joking?" he quavered.

"You think I am joking? Listen!" Once again Tamba Ngasi called for the television crew, and again issued a public statement.

YESTERDAY I cleansed my country of the Russians; today I expel the Chinese. They helped us from our post-colonial chaos—but why? To pursue their own advantage. We are not the fools they take us to be." Tamba Ngasi jerked a finger at Hsia Lu-Minh. "Speaking on behalf of his government, Comrade Hsia has agreed to my terms. The Chinese are withdrawing from Africa. They will leave at once. Hsia Lu-Minh has graciously consented to this. Lakhadi now has a stalwart defense, and no longer needs protection from anyone. Should anyone seek to thwart this purge of foreign influence, these weapons will be instantly used, without remorse. I cannot speak any plainer." He turned to the limp Chinese ambassador. "Comrade

Hsia, in the name of Africa, I thank you for your promise of cooperation, and I shall hold you to it!"

Hsia Lu-Minh tottered from the room. He returned to the Chinese Embassy and put a bullet through his head.

Eight hours later a Chinese plane arrived in Fejo, loaded with ministers, generals and aides. Tamba Ngasi received them immediately. Ting Sieuh-Ma, the leading Chinese theoretician, spoke vehemently. "You put us into an intolerable position. You must reverse yourself!"

Tamba Ngasi laughed. "There is only one road for you to travel. You must obey me. Do you think the Chinese will profit by going to war with Lakhadi? All Africa will rise against you; you will face disaster. And never forget our new weapons. At this moment they are aimed at the most sensitive areas in China."

Ting Sieuh-Ma's laugh was mocking. "It is the least of our worries. Do you think we would trust you with active warheads? Your ridiculous weapons are as harmless as mice."

Tamba Ngasi displayed the Swiss report. "I know this. The detonators: ninety-six percent lead, four percent radioactive waste. The lithium hydride—ordinary hydrogen. You cheated me; therefore I am expelling you from Africa. As for the war-

heads, I have dealt with a certain European power; even now they are installing active materials in these missiles you profess to despise. You have no choice. Get out of Africa within the week or prepare for disaster."

"It is disaster either way," said Ting Sieuh-Ma. "But ponder: you are a single man, we are the East. Can you really hope to best us?"

Tamba Ngasi bared his stainless-steel teeth in a wolfish grin. "That is my hope."

KEITH leaned back in his chair. The deputation had departed; he sat alone in the conference chamber. He felt drained of energy, lax and listless. Tamba Ngasi, temporarily at least, had been purged.

Keith thought of the last few days, and felt a pang of terror at his own recklessness. The recklessness, rather of Tamba Ngasi, who had humiliated and confused two of the great world powers. They would not forgive him. Adoui Shgwae, a relatively mild adversary, had been dissolved in acid. Tamba Ngasi, author of absolutely intolerable policies could hardly expect to survive.

Keith rubbed his long harsh chin and tried to formulate a plan for survival. For perhaps a week he might be safe, while his enemies decided upon a plan of attack . . .

Keith jumped to his feet. Why should there be any delay whatever? Minutes now were precious to both Russians and Chinese; they must have arranged for any and all contingencies.

His communication screen tinkled; the frowning face of Grand Marshal Achille Hashembe appeared. He spoke curtly. "I cannot understand your orders. Why should we hesitate now? Clear the vermin out, send them back to their own land—"

"What orders are you talking about?" Keith demanded.

"Those you issued five minutes ago in front of the palace, relative to the Chinese immigrants."

"I see," said Keith. "You are correct. There was a misunderstanding. Ignore these orders, proceed as before."

Hashembe nodded with brusque satisfaction; the screen faded. There would be no delay whatever, thought Keith. The Chinese already were striking. He twisted a knob on the screen, and his reception clerk looked forth. She seemed startled.

"Has anyone entered the palace during the last five minutes?"

"Only yourself, sir . . . How did you get upstairs so quickly?"

Keith cut her off. He went to the door, listened, and heard the hum of the rising elevator. He ran to his private apartments, snatched open a drawer. His

weapons—gone. Betrayed by one of his servants.

Keith went to the door, which led out into the terrace garden. From the garden he could make his way to the plaza and escape if he so chose. To his ears came a soft flutter of sound. Keith stepped out into the dark, searched the sky. The night was overcast; he could see only murk. But his radar apprised him of a descending object, and the infra-red detector in his hand felt heat.

From behind him, in his bedroom, came another soft sound. He turned, watched himself step warily through the door, glance around the room. They had done a good job, thought Keith, considering the shortness of the time. This version of Tamba Ngasi was perhaps a half-inch shorter than himself, the face was fuller, the skin a shade darker and not too subtly toned. He moved without the loose African swing, on legs thicker and shorter than Keith's own. Keith decided inconsequentially, that in order to simulate a Negro, it was best to begin with a Negro. In this respect at least the United States had an advantage.

The new Tamba left the bedroom. Keith slipped over to the door, intending to stalk him, attack with his bare hands, but now down from the sky came the object he had sensed on his radar:

a jigger-plane, little more than a seat suspended from four whirling air-foils. It landed softly on the dark terrace; Keith pressed against the wall, ducked behind an earthenware urn.

THE man from the sky approached, went to the sliding door, slipped into the bedroom. Keith stared. Tamba Ngasi once more, leaner and more angular than the first interloper. This Tamba from the sky looked quickly around the room, peered through the door into the corridor, stepped confidently through.

Keith followed cautiously. The Tamba from the sky jogged swiftly down the corridor, stopped at the archway giving on the tri-level study. Keith could not restrain a laugh at the farce of deadly misconceptions which now must ensue.

Sky-Tamba leapt into the study like a cat. Instantly there was an ejaculation of excitement, a sputter of deadly sound. Silence.

Keith ran to the doorway, and standing back in the shadow, peered into the study. Sky-Tamba stood holding some sort of gun or projector in one hand and a polished disc in the other. He sidled along the wall. Tamba Short-legs had ducked behind a bookcase, where Keith could hear him muttering under his breath. Sky-Tamba made a quick leap forward; from behind the book-

case came a sparkling line of light and ions. Sky-Tamba caught the beam on his shield, tossed a grenade which Tamba Short-legs thrust at the bookcase; it toppled forward; Sky-Tamba jerked back to avoid it. He tripped and sprawled awkwardly. Tamba Short-legs was on him, hacking with a hatchet, which gave off sparks and smoke where it struck.

Sky-Tamba lay dead, his mission a failure, his life ended. Tamba Short-legs rose in triumph. He saw Keith, uttered a guttural expletive of surprise. He bounded like a rubber ball down to the second landing, intending to out-flank Keith.

Keith ran to the body of Sky-Tamba, tugged at his weapon, but it was caught under the heavy body. A line of ionizing light sizzled across his face; he fell flat. Tamba Short-legs came running up the steps; Keith yanked furiously at the weapon, but there would be no time: his end had come.

Tamba Short-legs stepped short. In the doorway opposite stood a lean harsh-visaged man in white robes—still another Tamba. This one was like Keith, in skin, feature, and heft, identical except for an indefinable difference of expression. The three gazed stupefied at each other; the Tamba Short-legs aimed his electric beam. New Tamba slipped to the side like a shadow,

slashing the air with his laser. Tamba Short-legs dropped, rolled over, drove forward in a low crouch. New Tamba waited for him; they grappled. Sparks flew from their feet as each sought to electrocute the other; each had been equipped with ground circuits, and the electricity dissipated harmlessly. Tamba Short-legs disengaged himself, swung his hatchet. New Tamba dodged back, pointed his laser. Tamba Short-legs threw the hatchet, knocked the laser spinning. The two men sprang together. Keith

picked up hatchet and laser and prepared to deal with the survivor. "Peculiar sort of assassination," he reflected. "Everyone gets killed but the victim."

Tamba Short-legs and New Tamba were locked in a writhing tangle. There was a clicking sound, a gasp. One of the men stood up, faced Keith: New Tamba.

Keith aimed the laser. New Tamba held up his hands, moved back. He cried, "Don't shoot me, James Keith. I'm your replacement."

THE END

# ENTRANCE EXAM

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

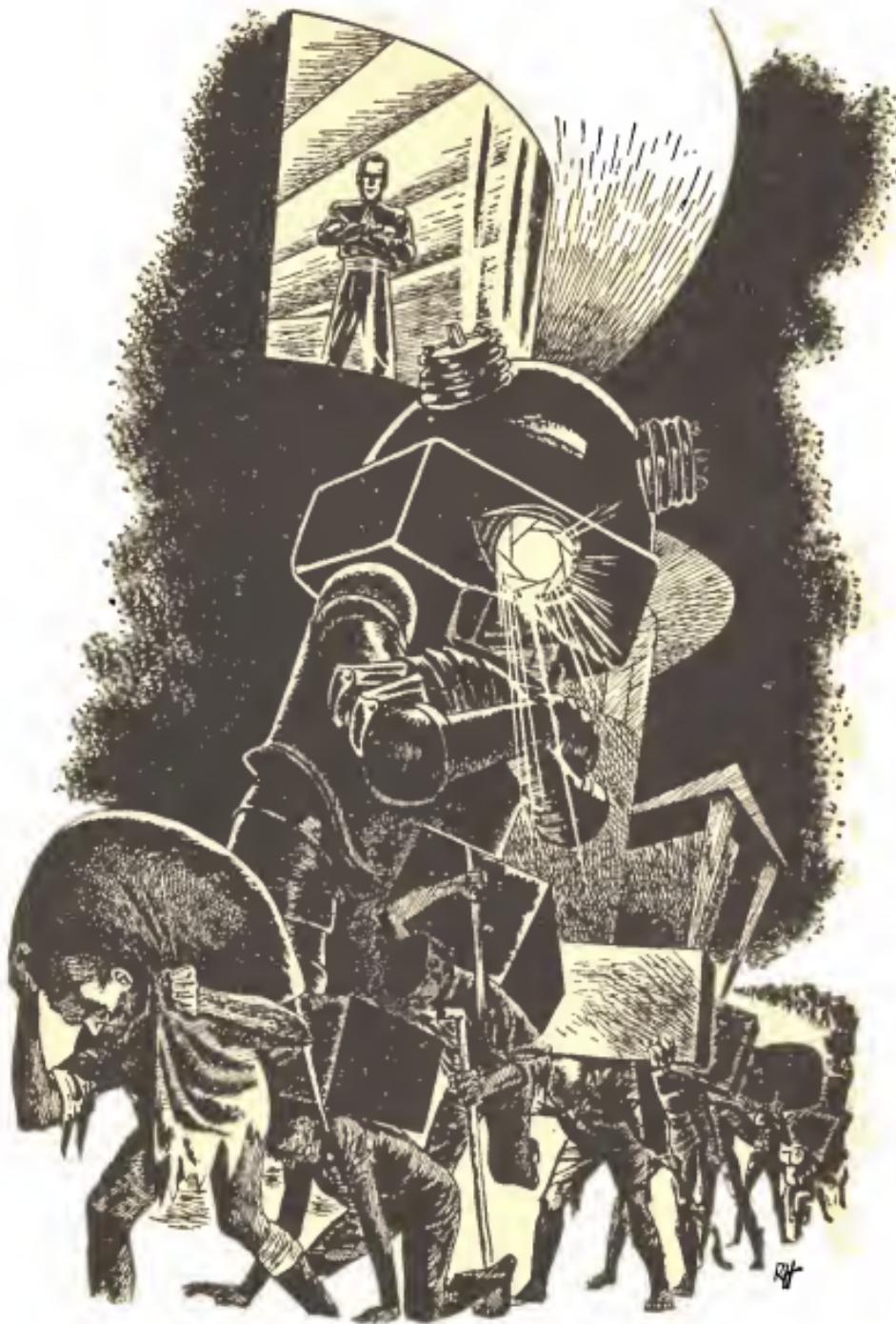
*The Menials lived Outside where the chosen ones on the inside were forbidden to go. They were contacted only by robots that had to be thoroughly sterilized afterwards. The Menials were children of despair and desolation and were looked upon with contempt and loathing by the insiders. Discrimination? You ain't read nothin' yet!*

ON JACSON, unable to suppress his boredom, dropped his stylo and walked to the window of his Ninetieth Floor office. He pressed a button and the window slid open, revealing the dark, moonless sky.

He looked out, smiling bitterly. The bright dots of light against the black velvet of the sky were stars, they said, and around them were other worlds. So they said; he would never know. Lon's world was Sector IV, in what had once been North America. Sector IV was a single huge building, a mile high and six miles square at its base. Lon had never been

Outside the Sector—not in all his twenty-four years.

He could barely make out the distant tower that was Sector III. They said the neighboring Sector was fifteen miles away, but to Lon it might just as well have been as far away as the stars. No one ever went Outside. Outside the Sector lived the Menials, the half-savage criminals and descendants of criminals condemned to farm and to supply fresh food to the Sectors in exchange for tools—the exchange being carried out by robots carefully sterilized before re-entering the Sector. For, in the Sectors, all disease had been



eliminated, and they did not dare risk contamination from Outside.

The buzzer sounded. Lon whirled, snapped on the phone, and watched as the familiar face of the Elder Preston swirled into view on the screen. Lon saluted.

"Yes, Elder Preston?"

The old man cleared his throat. "Just checking, Jackson. I noticed you didn't have your medic report in to me yet, and I thought I'd remind you that according to Regulations you've got only an hour before deadline. Better get moving!"

"Yes, sir," Lon said nervously. He returned reluctantly to his desk and took a report blank from a drawer. "Report for the period Feb. 1-30, 2716," he wrote hurriedly. "Sector IV. Health standards for this period were 99.07 of expectancy. Four accidents, all minor and suitably treated as described in attached transcripts. No other activity in Medic Bureau for this period. Sector IV remains in Health Percentile 98."

*It's all unnecessary, he thought angrily while filling out the form. Nothing but an endless life of routine paperwork. And there's no way out.*

He reached over and turned

up the wall-glow a bit. After a moment the light brightened, and he continued. "Report concluded subject to check. Lon Jacson 04168, Sector Medic cert. 2712."

*There, he thought. He folded the report, gave it a cursory scanning, and dropped it into a gleaming metalline container. He screwed the cap tight. On a sudden wild impulse he held the metalline to his lips and breathed on it. It clouded over.*

"Good," he snorted mockingly. "That proves I'm alive." He dropped the container into the pneumotube on his desk and heard the click of the receiver. He tried to picture the thin, shiny tube dropping for ninety stories to the Low Floor, where the Elders worked. They checked and rechecked endlessly, as if deliberately trying to detect a medic in an error. They had caught Lon only once so far. That had been three years before, when he had been a raw recruit fresh from Medic University.

It had been Elder Preston, Lon recalled, who had summoned him. The stern old man had looked up at him from the comfort of his soft couch.

"Are you Jacson 04168?" Lon remembered nodding stiffly. "Yes, sir."

"You're new on this job, aren't you?" snapped the Elder.

"Graduated from Medic University, 162nd Floor, certified in 2712, sir. Appointed early this year."

"You're mighty careless for a recruit," the old man said, holding out one of Lon's reports. "Look at this report."

Lon began to tremble. He took the sheet from the Elder and examined it. "It seems all right to me, sir."

"What color stylo did you fill it out with, Jacson?"

"Blue, sir," Lon said cautiously.

"Blue, eh? Have you ever read the Regulations? Do you know what the Regulation is covering color of ink on reports?"

"No, sir."

"I didn't think so. From now on, Jacson, make your reports to me out in *black*, understand? And read the Regulations tonight instead of taking your assigned Games period."

"Yes, sir," Lon said. He backed out timidly, feeling utterly terrified of the old man. It wasn't until he was out in the corridor that he

realized he *had* used a black stylo after all.

Later, the thought struck him that the whole incident had been fabricated, that the Elders had chemically altered the color of his writing for some reason of their own—probably just to give themselves an excuse for demonstrating their awesomeness to a frightened recruit. It was an idea he didn't dare broach to anyone; it smacked of subversiveness.

He ceased musing and walked out of the office, still revolving that incident of three years before in his mind. The photo-electric eye recognized him as he went out, and the door clicked softly shut behind him.

He had been assigned a Games period that evening, his first in over a month, and he was looking forward to his turn. The Games were the best of a poor lot of diversions. He walked down the long corridor, turning in at a glass door engraved "Psych."

He broke the photo-eye band and a soft bell rang inside. "Mart?" he called.

"A minute, Lon," came the answer from within. "Haven't sent my report down yet."

"Check. I'll wait out here." Jacson walked to the other

side of the wall and placed his hand over a gleaming red light. The wall parted and a bench appeared in the concealed alcove. He sprawled himself down.

In a few minutes Mart Drew 05138, Psych Bureau, came out of his office and the door closed behind him. "Hello, Lon."

Lon stepped out of the alcove. Instantly the bench slid back and the wall closed. "Hello, old man."

Mart, a tall young man bearing a sharp resemblance to Lon—after centuries of inbreeding, all men looked somewhat alike—nodded curtly. "Finish your report?"

"Just now," Lon said. "The usual stuff. I could have done it in my sleep. Medic Bureau never has any work; it's you Psych boys who have something to do, lucky devils!"

"Don't fool yourself, son," Mart Drew said. "It's not as exciting as you think. For half a credit I'd give the whole thing up, go Outside, and become a Menial!"

Lon chuckled. "I can just see it—you, swinging girders and breaking stones and pulling plows." He reached for Drew's hand and pinched the flesh of the palm. It turned a bloodless white and

then quickly became an angry red.

"You'd rip those hands to shreds in a day," Lon said. "You've done nothing harder than write reports all your life. Better stay in the Sector, where you belong."

Drew shook his head. "That's *not* where I belong, Lon. I want to get Outside—and I'm going to get there, sooner than you think. Just wait, and I'll show you!"

Lon looked at the Psych man, shocked despite himself. True, getting Outside was Lon's own secret dream, and he had many times cursed the walls that held him back, but he would never dare admit that out loud to anyone.

"Quiet, Mart! Suppose the Elders have this floor wired?"

"Suppose they do," Mart demanded. "They'll hear about me soon enough." They walked along silently for a while, then turned a corner in the corridor. Facing the wall, they took their positions and an invisible slit opened, revealing an elevator.

Mart drew out his Games Room assignment slip. "You have one of these for tonight too?"

"At long last," Lon said. "It's been weeks since my last turn down there."

"Same here," Mart said.  
"But tonight's the night!"

They stepped into the elevator and the doors snapped shut. Lon felt his stomach sink as the numbers on the wall panel began to flick on and off. *Eighty-nine. Eighty. Seventy-six.*

Lon became almost hypnotized by the panel as the numbers dwindled. Finally, as they reached *Forty-two*, he said, "Are you really serious about going Outside?"

"Deadly serious," Drew replied grimly. "I want out."

"I wish you luck," Lon said. "But they'll never let you."

"We'll see about that," Mart said.

The elevator stopped at *Seventeen*. They got out and headed down the corridor to the Games Room. The entrance was crowded with dozens of others who had drawn assignments for that night.

"Games Room," came the cold, impersonal statement from the door robot. "May I see your platens, please?"

They laid the plastic coin-like identification tokens on the counter, where the scanner looked them over and recorded the names. "Recorded," the robot said. "Jacson

04168, Drew 05138, choose your Game." It drew away, motivated by photo-electric responses. Lon and Mart confronted a multitude of doors.

"This one," Mart said.

Lon nodded. "Suits me." They walked in.

The Game was before them, in a private room with the door sealed behind them. It was utterly silent inside.

"I've never seen this one before," Lon said. "How does it work? Or don't you know either?"

"Don't worry," Mart said confidently. "I've played this one already. It's a cinch, if you know the angles. You just roll those colored balls up the hill and swipe them with the lever so they drop into the holes of the right color."

He drew out a plunger. Five small metallic balls became visible. "You go first," Mart said. "I want to study the thing a little more."

Lon shrugged. "All right." He stepped up to the machine and pushed in the plunger. The red ball began to climb to the top of the slide.

"Now!" Mart yelled. Lon twisted a dial sharply. By remote control, a lever twenty feet away reached for the catapult and hurled the red

ball across the room into a waiting red-colored hole. It lit up with a satisfying glow.

"Good shot, Jacson," Mart said approvingly. "The black one, now!" Again the lever swooped down, again the click of metal meeting metal, again the flying pellet launched across the room. It ricocheted off a plate and settled into the black slot. Another light went up.

"That's two!"

Now the green one began to slide slowly up the catapult. Lon waited. In a split-second move he brought his wrist around. The green ball bounced from the far-off wall and settled in its hole. The third light lit up. With more than half the Game won, Lon felt a tingle of exultation.

"These last two are the hardest," Mart warned. "Especially the last; its motion curve is unpredictable."

The violet ball came barreling up to the top of the tube. A well-timed whack sent it flying into its proper position, and the fourth light lit. Only one unlit bulb stared nakedly at them.

The gold ball crawled up from the bottom of the slide, inching along at an agonizing snail's pace. Lon held the lever ready, waiting for the ball to reach the top.

Then, suddenly, everything blurred. The gold ball accelerated and shot past as Lon took a futile swipe at it; it hit the ceiling, fell back past the impotent lever into the catapult, and rolled down to its starting point. The other four balls dropped from their slots, and the light went out.

"I fumbled it," Lon said dejectedly. "Sorry, Mart."

"Don't let it bother you," Mart said. "We still have two more cracks at it—and we're going to make it. I haven't been waiting for this chance for weeks just to throw it away!"

He meant what he said. After fifteen minutes of tense action, Mart finally gave an expert flip to the speeding pellet, caught the gold ball at the height of its climb, and the fifth light burst at them from the wall.

A robot entered and slid over to them, staring blankly forward. "Congratulations on your skill," it said. "You may stop now and accept the customary reward, or go on to the next Game, as you prefer."

Lon exchanged a glance with Mart. The "customary reward" was a free hour, generally with extra lab privileges. Every time Lon

had won a Game, he had quit here, joyfully accepting the extra lab period. He didn't know what prize he might win if he proceeded to the next Game, but he did know he'd lose everything if he failed to win it.

"We'll quit here," Lon told the robot.

"Not me," Mart said. "I'm going on!" He looked at Lon. "How about you?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not," Lon said. He had what he wanted, and didn't care to risk losing it, not on the insane chance that he might be allowed Outside. "You go ahead, Mart. And—all the luck in the world, man."

"Thanks, Lon," Mart said. The robot led him through an inner door, which closed behind them.

At the beginning of the second period the next day Mart burst into Lon's office. Lon looked up from his work. "How'd it go?"

Mart was exultant. "I won! It was simple, ridiculously simple, and I won! Too bad you decided to call it quits."

"What's the prize?"

"Anything! I can have any request whatsoever. You know what I picked?"

"I can guess," Lon said.

"You asked for permission to go Outside. And they refused point-blank."

"Half right, Lon. I asked, true. But they *didn't* refuse! They approved the request immediately, and I'm to be allowed Outside for three periods today. Imagine, Lon—at last someone's getting a look at the Outside world!"

Lon stared up at his friend, unable to conceal his envy. After a while he said, "Let me know what it's like out there. I'm probably never going to make it myself."

"Will do." Mart looked at his watch. "Time to be going. I'll see you when I get back—and don't work too hard!"

"Don't worry about me," Lon said as Mart left.

*Time for my lab period*, he thought when the door closed. He was angry at himself for not having had Mart's boldness. All he had to show for his trip to the Games Room was some extra lab time, and Mart—and Mart—

It was incredible. The sternest regulation of all, being broken? Mart, going Outside? Lon shook his head.

He withdrew into the inner laboratory and surveyed his equipment. He examined his experiments-in-progress

boredly and sank down on a bench, feeling no desire at all to work. He decided he would do no research today. He'd read, instead.

Lon scribbled an order for a book, the same early history book he'd read during his last free period. It was a record of the strange, tormented, fascinating times before the Era of No Disease—the years before the Sectors were established and all of mankind placed in the enormous buildings.

He dropped the order into the pneumotube, and the book, wrapped in protectoplast, arrived almost immediately. Lon reached for it hungrily and began to read the story of those amazing years.

The chapter that most greatly interested him was the one on twentieth-century illnesses. Their names were weird, forbidding ones: tuberculosis, poliomyelitis, cancer, even something called the common cold, which, apparently, everyone had contracted regularly.

At the Medic University they had taught him how these diseases had gradually been conquered by man—the Salk Vaccine that wiped out polio, the Kennely Beam that ended the menace of cancer,

the Antihistamine drugs that had finished off the cold. All these things were on display at the Medical Museum on the Eighty-sixth Floor; none had been needed for centuries in Sector IV.

As the diseases were conquered, so, too, did man's resistance to them diminish. Thus the establishment of the Sectors, enclosures blocked off from any possible outside contamination.

Why, then, Lon asked himself, did the Elders allow Mart to go Outside, breaking the seal of sterility which was the whole reason for the Sector's existence? It made no sense at all.

Lon read for the rest of his free period, very much disturbed, and sent the book back down the tube. At the end of the hour he returned to his regular work. In two hours Mart would be back from Outside, and he was impatient to find out what it was like out there.

Minutes slipped off into tens of minutes, until it was almost time for Mart's return. Lon moved dreamily through his day's routine, waiting.

Suddenly the buzzer sounded, and Elder Preston's face appeared, even grimmer-looking than usual.

"Jacson? A diseased man is being brought back from Outside. He is on his way to your Bureau in a protective suit. Your orders are to confirm his condition and destroy him before he contaminates the entire Sector."

Shocked, Lon let his reflexes take over. Automatically he snapped a Safety Helmet over his face and sterilized his hands. None too soon, for the robots carried in a figure hidden in a bulky protective suit and placed him on the diagnosis table. They slid out, silently as they had come.

Without even looking, Lon knew who it was. Mart Drew, sneezing and coughing—the symptoms of the ancient common cold, a mere nuisance then but a deadly menace in the antiseptic world of Sector IV.

Why? Why had the Elders deliberately let him go Outside and contaminate himself so he would have to be destroyed?

The answer suddenly seemed obvious. *They wanted Mart out of the way.* They knew he had strange ideas, and they wanted to get rid of him. Lon came to an abrupt decision.

"You won't get away with it!" he shouted to the dead

screen. "I'm not going to play hangman for you! A Medic is supposed to cure, and I'm going to *cure* him."

He was trembling. He knew he would be disobeying an Elder's direct order by not removing the danger of disease immediately, but, oddly, he didn't care. Removing the danger meant killing Mart, the Elder seemed to think—and he wouldn't do it, not when it was possible to save him.

Elder Preston's face appeared on the screen. "Have you done it?" he asked.

"Not yet," Lon said. Defiantly he shut the screen off and burst through the door. *To hell with the Regulations*, he thought fiercely. *What's an Elder's order next to a man's life?*

He ran down the corridor as fast as legs rusty from disuse would take him. Scorning the elevator, he trotted down the stairs to the Eighty-sixth Floor and dashed around the corridor to the Medical Museum.

He moved quickly up and down among the cases, peering through the glass. Finally he found what he wanted—the Antihistamine syringe.

He hesitated for a moment, then lashed a fist at

the glass, smashing through without noticing the pain and the blood welling from his cut fingers, or the hiss of the escaping preservative gas. Lon reached in and seized the syringe, just as a pair of robots arrived on the scene.

He backtracked, dodged around them, and dashed up the stairs. He saw the confused robots collide as he ran by.

Breathless, he got back to his office and drew out the syringe. He began to open the protective suit.

The dinning of the alarm sounded in his ears, and someone in the distance was yelling something about quarantine, but he ignored it and proceeded to administer the cure.

Two hours later, he was sitting quietly in Elder Preston's office, calm and self-satisfied. He was not even frightened of the grim old man now.

"It was incredible, Jacson," the Elder said. "Shameful flaunting of the Regulations, near destruction of the entire Sector, exposure to illness—" The old man's horror and anger was evident on his face.

"I've explained to you

twice why I did what I did," Lon said. "I'll try once more. I had no intention of following your cruel and pointless order when it meant killing my friend, as long as it was in my power to save him."

"I know," the Elder said. "But don't you realize that it was necessary for the good of the entire Sector that the source of the danger be eradicated at once?"

Lon looked up angrily. *"Then why did you send him to me? You knew what I'd do. Why not eradicate him yourself?"*

The Elder smiled. "I'll tell you that later."

"Why don't you come to the point, Preston?" Lon snapped. He felt neither fear nor danger any more. He had already committed the most serious crime possible, and they could hardly kill him twice. "What are you going to do with me? What's my punishment? Get it over with quick, will you?"

"Your punishment?" A curious smile played over the old man's face. "Come here, Jacson. I want to show you something."

He opened the window-screen, and the stars were visible. The Elder gestured outward. "The stars," he said.

"So?"

"We've been building a ship, down here on the lower levels. A ship to go to the stars. It needs a crew, and colonists for a new world. Colonists must be clever men, individual thinkers, flexible, bold, men capable of acting in an emergency and breaking rules when necessary. We don't have many of those men any more. Our life here has become too well regulated; there are no challenges. Men grow soft here. Ingenuity gets bred out."

"What does this have to do with me?" Lon asked impatiently.

"When there are no challenges," the Elder continued, ignoring him, "we have to invent some. We see to it that a man has a chance to go Outside, and we watch his reaction. We put other men in positions of inner conflict, and see what they do. Some fail; others don't."

Mart Drew entered the room.

"Mart passed the test the other day, when he requested permission to go Outside. That was the bold act that told us he was a potential colonist. Then we trumped up this little charade for you today. We've been watching

you for three years, hoping you'd develop into colonist material."

Suddenly Lon's knees felt weak.

"The whole thing—Mart's cold, everything, all just a game—?"

"Not a game, Lon," the Elder said. "Call it an entrance exam. And you've passed. You're the sort of man we need to build our colony."

He pointed through the window at the twinkling blackness of the sky. "I'm sorry we had to fool you, but now the stars are waiting for you. I wish I could go with you. Good luck, out there," he said, and his wrinkled face suddenly no longer looked stern, but merely very tired.

Lon looked at Mart, and then back to the Elder. "How do I know that this isn't another game, some other kind of exam itself?"

"Not this time," the Elder said, smiling. "The ship blasts off tomorrow."

It was only when the massive Sector IV building had become a tiny dot on the rapidly dwindling landscape below and the sky was drawing near that Lon really believed him.

THE END

"Any problem posed by one group of human beings can be resolved by any other group." That's what the Handbook said. But did that include primitive humans? Or the Bees? Or a . . .

# CONTROL GROUP

By ROGER DEE

THE cool green disk of Alphard Six on the screen was infinitely welcome after the arid desolation and stinking swamplands of the inner planets, an airy jewel of a world that might have been designed specifically for the hard-earned month of rest ahead. Navigator Farrell, youngest and certainly most impulsive of the three-man Terran Reclamations crew, would have set the *Marco Four* down at once but for the greater caution of Stryker, nominally captain of the group, and of Gibson, engineer, and linguist. Xavier, the ship's little mechanical, had—as was usual and proper—no voice in the matter.

"Reconnaissance spiral first, Arthur," Stryker said firmly. He chuckled at Farrell's instant scowl, his little eyes twinkling and his naked paunch quaking

over the belt of his shipboard shorts. "Chapter One, Subsection Five, Paragraph Twenty-seven: *No planetfall on an unclaimed world shall be deemed safe without proper—*"

Farrell, as Stryker had expected, interrupted with characteristic impatience. "Do you sleep with that damned Reclamations Handbook, Lee? Alphard Six isn't an unclaimed world—it was never colonized before the Hymenop invasion back in 3025, so why should it be inhabited now?"

Gibson, who for four hours had not looked up from his interminable chess game with Xavier, paused with a beleaguered knight in one blunt brown hand.

"No point in taking chances," Gibson said in his neutral baritone. He shrugged thick bare

shoulders, his humorless black-browed face unmoved, when Farrell included him in his scowl. "We're two hundred twenty-six light-years from Sol, at the old limits of Terran expansion, and there's no knowing what we may turn up here. Alphard's was one of the first systems the Bees took over. It must have been one of the last to be abandoned when they pulled back to 70 Ophiuchi."

"And I think *you* live for the day," Farrell said acidly, "when we'll stumble across a functioning dome of live, buzzing Hymenops. Damn it, Gib, the Bees pulled out a hundred years ago, before you and I were born—neither of us ever saw a Hymenop, and never will!"

"But I saw them," Stryker said. "I fought them for the better part of the century they were here, and I learned there's no predicting nor understanding them. We never knew why they came nor why they gave up and left. How can we know whether they'd leave a rear-guard or booby trap here?"

He put a paternal hand on Farrell's shoulder, understanding the younger man's eagerness and knowing that their close-knit team would have been the more poorly balanced without it.

"Gib's right," he said. He nearly added *as usual*. "We're on rest leave at the moment, yes, but our mission is still to find Terran colonies enslaved and abandoned by the Bees, not to risk our necks and a valuable

Reorientations ship by landing blind on an unobserved planet. We're too close already. Cut in your shields and find a reconnaissance spiral, will you?"

Grumbling, Farrell punched coordinates on the Ringwave board that lifted the *Marco Four* out of her descent and restored the bluish enveloping haze of her repellers.

Stryker's caution was justified on the instant. The speeding streamlined shape that had flashed up unobserved from below swerved sharply and exploded in a cataclysmic blaze of atomic fire that rocked the ship wildly and flung the three men to the floor in a jangling roar of alarms.

"So the Handbook tacticians knew what they were about," Stryker said minutes later. Deliberately he adopted the smug tone best calculated to sting Farrell out of his first self-reproach, and grinned when the navigator bristled defensively. "Some of their enjoinders seem a little stuffy and obvious at times, but they're eminently sensible."

When Farrell refused to be baited Stryker turned to Gibson, who was busily assessing the damage done to the ship's more fragile equipment, and to Xavier, who searched the planet's surface with the ship's magnoscanner. The *Marco Four*, Ringwave generators humming gently, hung at the moment just inside the orbit of Alphard Six's single dun-colored moon.

Gibson put down a test meter with an air of finality.

"Nothing damaged but the Zero Interval Transfer computer. I can realign that in a couple of hours, but it'll have to be done before we hit Transfer again."

Stryker looked dubious. "What if the issue is forced before the ZIT unit is repaired? Suppose they come up after us?"

"I doubt that they can. Any installation crudely enough equipped to trust in guided missiles is hardly likely to have developed efficient space craft."

Stryker was not reassured.

"That torpedo of theirs was deadly enough," he said. "And its nature reflects the nature of the people who made it. Any race vicious enough to use atomic charges is too dangerous to trifle with." Worry made comical creases in his fat, good-humored face. "We'll have to find out who they are and why they're here, you know."

"They can't be Hymenops," Gibson said promptly. "First, because the Bees pinned their faith on Ringwave energy fields, as we did, rather than on missiles. Second, because there's no dome on Six."

"There were three empty domes on Five, which is a desert planet," Farrell pointed out. "Why didn't they settle Six? It's a more habitable world."

Gibson shrugged. "I know the Bees always erected domes on every planet they colonized, Ar-

thur, but precedent is a fallible tool. And it's even more firmly established that there's no possibility of our rationalizing the motivations of a culture as alien as the Hymenops'—we've been over that argument a hundred times on other reclaimed worlds."

"But this was never an unclaimed world," Farrell said with the faint malice of one too recently caught in the wrong. "Alphard Six was surveyed and seeded with Terran bacteria around the year 3000, but the Bees invaded before we could colonize. And that means we'll have to rule out any resurgent colonial group down there, because Six never had a colony in the beginning."

"The Bees have been gone for over a hundred years," Stryker said. "Colonists might have migrated from another Terran-occupied planet."

Gibson disagreed.

"We've touched at every inhabited world in this sector, Lee, and not one surviving colony has developed space travel on its own. The Hymenops had a hundred years to condition their human slaves to ignorance of everything beyond their immediate environment—the motives behind that conditioning usually escape us, but that's beside the point—and they did a thorough job of it. The colonists have had no more than a century of freedom since the Bees pulled out and four generations simply isn't enough time for any sub-

jugated culture to climb from slavery to interstellar flight."

Stryker made a padding turn about the control room, tugging unhappily at the scanty fringe of hair the years had left him.

"If they're neither Hymenops nor resurgent colonists," he said, "then there's only one choice remaining—they're aliens from a system we haven't reached yet, beyond the old sphere of Terran exploration. We always assumed that we'd find other races out here someday, and that they'd be as different from us in form and motivation as the Hymenops. Why not now?"

Gibson said seriously, "Not probable, Lee. The same objection that rules out the Bees applies to any trans-Alphardian culture—they'd have to be beyond the atomic fission stage, else they'd never have attempted interstellar flight. The Ringwave with its Zero Interval Transfer principle and instantaneous communications applications is the only answer to long-range travel, and if they'd had that they wouldn't have bothered with atomics."

Stryker turned on him almost angrily. "If they're not Hymenops or humans or aliens, then what in God's name *are* they?"

"Aye, there's the rub," Farrell said, quoting a passage whose aptness had somehow seen it through a dozen reorganizations of insular tongue and a final translation to universal Terran. "If they're none of those

three, we've only one conclusion left. There's no one down there at all—we're victims of the first joint hallucination in psychiatric history."

Stryker threw up his hands in surrender. "We can't identify them by theorizing, and that brings us down to the business of first-hand investigation. Who's going to bell the cat this time?"

"I'd like to go," Gibson said at once. "The ZIT computer can wait."

Stryker vetoed his offer as promptly. "No, the ZIT comes first. We may have to run for it, and we can't set up a Transfer jump without the computer. It's got to be me or Arthur."

Farrell felt the familiar chill of uneasiness that inevitably preceded this moment of decision. He was not lacking in courage, else the circumstances under which he had worked for the past ten years—the sometimes perilous, sometimes downright charnel conditions left by the fleeing Hymenop conquerors—would have broken him long ago. But that same hard experience had honed rather than blunted the edge of his imagination, and the prospect of a close-quarters stalking of an unknown and patently hostile force was anything but attractive.

"You two did the field work on the last location," he said. "It's high time I took my turn—and God knows I'd go mad if I had to stay inship and listen to Lee memorizing his Hand-

book subsections or to Gib practicing dead languages with Xavier."

Stryker laughed for the first time since the explosion that had so nearly wrecked the *Marco Four*.

"Good enough. Though it wouldn't be more diverting to listen for hours to you improvising enharmonic variations on the *Lament for Old Terra* with your accordion."

Gibson, characteristically, had a refinement to offer.

"They'll be alerted down there for a reconnaissance sally," he said. "Why not let Xavier take the scouter down for overt diversion, and drop Arthur off in the helihopper for a low-level check?"

Stryker looked at Farrell. "All right, Arthur?"

"Good enough," Farrell said. And to Xavier, who had not moved from his post at the magnoscanner: "How does it look, Xav? Have you pinned down their base yet?"

The mechanical answered him in a voice as smooth and clear—and as inflectionless—as a 'cello note. "The planet seems uninhabited except for a large island some three hundred miles in diameter. There are twenty-seven small agrarian hamlets surrounded by cultivated fields. There is one city of perhaps a thousand buildings with a central square. In the square rests a grounded spaceship of approximately ten times the bulk of the *Marco Four*."

They crowded about the vision screen, jostling Xavier's jointed gray shape in their interest. The central city lay in minutest detail before them, the battered hulk of the grounded ship glinting rustily in the late afternoon sunlight. Streets radiated away from the square in orderly succession, the whole so clearly depicted that they could see the throngs of people surging up and down, tiny foreshortened faces turned toward the sky.

"At least they're human," Farrell said. Relief replaced in some measure his earlier uneasiness. "Which means that they're Terran, and can be dealt with according to Reclamations routine. Is that hulk spaceworthy, Xav?"

Xavier's mellow drone assumed the convention vibrato that indicated stark puzzlement. "Its breached hull makes the ship incapable of flight. Apparently it is used only to supply power to the outlying hamlets."

The mechanical put a flexible gray finger upon an indicator graph derived from a composite section of detector meters. "The power transmitted seems to be gross electric current conveyed by metallic cables. It is generated through a crudely governed process of continuous atomic fission."

Farrell, himself appalled by the information, still found himself able to chuckle at Stryker's bellow of consternation.

"Continuous fission? Good

God, only madmen would deliberately run a risk like that!"

Farrell prodded him with cheerful malice. "Why say mad men? Maybe they're humanoid aliens who thrive on hard radiation and look on the danger of being blown to hell in the middle of the night as a satisfactory risk."

"They're not alien," Gibson said positively. "Their architecture is Terran, and so is their ship. The ship is incredibly primitive, though; those batteries of tubes at either end—"

"Are thrust reaction jets," Stryker finished in an awed voice. "Primitive isn't the word, Gib—the thing is prehistoric! Rocket propulsion hasn't been used in spacecraft since—how long, Xav?"

Xavier supplied the information with mechanical infallibility. "Since the year 2100 when the Ringwave propulsion-communication principle was discovered. That principle has served men since."

Farrell stared in blank disbelief at the anomalous craft on the screen. Primitive, as Stryker had said, was not the word for it: clumsily ovoid, studded with torpedo domes and turrets and bristling at either end with propulsion tubes, it lay at the center of its square like a rusted relic of a past largely destroyed and all but forgotten. What a magnificent disregard its builders must have had, he thought, for their lives and the genetic purity of their posterity! The

sullen atomic fires banked in that oxidizing hulk—

Stryker said plaintively, "If you're right, Gib, then we're more in the dark than ever. How could a Terran-built ship eleven hundred years old get *here*?"

Gibson, absorbed in his chess-player's contemplation of alternatives, seemed hardly to hear him.

"Logic or not-logic," Gibson said. "If it's a Terran artifact, we can discover the reason for its presence. If not—"

*"Any problem posed by one group of human beings,"* Stryker quoted his Handbook, *"can be resolved by any other group, regardless of ideology or conditioning, because the basic perceptive abilities of both must be the same through identical heredity."*

"If it's an imitation, and this is another Hymenop experiment in condition ecology, then we're stumped to begin with," Gibson finished. "Because we're not equipped to evaluate the psychology of alien motivation. We've got to determine first which case applies here."

He waited for Farrell's expected irony, and when the navigator forestalled him by remaining grimly quiet, continued.

"The obvious premise is that a Terran ship must have been built by Terrans. Question: Was it flown here, or built here?"

"It couldn't have been built here," Stryker said. "Alphard

Six was surveyed just before the Bees took over in 3025, and there was nothing of the sort here then. It couldn't have been built during the two and a quarter centuries since; it's obviously much older than that. It was flown here."

"We progress," Farrell said dryly. "Now if you'll tell us *how*, we're ready to move."

"I think the ship was built on Terra during the Twenty-second Century," Gibson said calmly. "The atomic wars during that period destroyed practically all historical records along with the technology of the time, but I've read well-authenticated reports of atomic-driven ships leaving Terra before then for the nearer stars. The human race climbed out of its pit again during the Twenty-third Century and developed the technology that gave us the Ringwave. Certainly no atomic-powered ships were built after the wars—our records are complete from that time."

Farrell shook his head at the inference. "I've read any number of fanciful romances on the theme, Gib, but it won't stand up in practice. No shipboard society could last through a thousand-year space voyage. It's a physical and psychological impossibility. There's got to be some other explanation."

Gibson shrugged. "We can only eliminate the least likely alternatives and accept the simplest one remaining."

"Then we can eliminate this

one now," Farrell said flatly. "It entails a thousand-year voyage, which is an impossibility for any gross reaction drive; the application of suspended animation or longevity or a successive-generation program, and a final penetration of Hymenop-occupied space to set up a colony under the very antennae of the Bees. Longevity wasn't developed until around the year 3000—Lee here was one of the first to profit by it, if you remember—and suspended animation is still to come. So there's one theory you can forget."

"Arthur's right," Stryker said reluctantly. "An atomic-powered ship *couldn't* have made such a trip, Gib. And such a lineal-descendant project couldn't have lasted through forty generations, speculative fiction to the contrary—the later generations would have been too far removed in ideology and intent from their ancestors. They'd have adapted to shipboard life as the norm. They'd have atrophied physically, perhaps even have mutated—"

"And they'd never have fought past the Bees during the Hymenop invasion and occupation," Farrell finished triumphantly. "The Bees had better detection equipment than we had. They'd have picked this ship up long before it reached Alphard Six."

"But the ship wasn't here in 3000," Gibson said, "and it is now. Therefore it must have arrived at some time during the

two hundred years of Hymenop occupation and evacuation."

Farrell, tangled in contradictions, swore bitterly. "But why should the Bees let them through? The three domes on Five are over two hundred years old, which means that the Bees were here before the ship came. Why didn't they blast it or enslave its crew?"

"We haven't touched on all the possibilities," Gibson reminded him. "We haven't even established yet that these people were never under Hymenop control. Precedent won't hold always, and there's no predicting nor evaluating the motives of an alien race. We never understood the Hymenops because there's no common ground of logic between us. Why try to interpret their intentions now?"

Farrell threw up his hands in disgust. "Next you'll say this is an ancient Terran expedition that actually succeeded! There's only one way to answer the questions we've raised, and that's to go down and see for ourselves. Ready, Xav?"

But uncertainty nagged uneasily at him when Farrell found himself alone in the helihopper with the forest flowing beneath like a leafy river and Xavier's scouter disappearing bulletlike into the dusk ahead.

We never found a colony so advanced, Farrell thought. Suppose this is a Hymenop experiment that really paid off? The Bees did some weird and won-

derful things with human guinea pigs—what if they've created the ultimate booby trap here, and primed it with conditioned myrmidons in our own form?

Suppose, he thought—and derided himself for thinking it—one of those suicidal old interstellar ventures did succeed?

Xavier's voice, a mellow drone from the helihopper's Ringwave-powered visicom, cut sharply into his musing. "The ship has discovered the scouter and is training an electronic beam upon it. My instruments record an electromagnetic vibration pattern of low power but rapidly varying frequency. The operation seems pointless."

Stryker's voice followed, querulous with worry: "I'd better pull Xav back. It may be something lethal."

"Don't," Gibson's baritone advised. Surprisingly, there was excitement in the engineer's voice. "I think they're trying to communicate with us."

Farrell was on the point of demanding acidly to know how one went about communicating by means of a fluctuating electric field when the unexpected cessation of forest diverted his attention. The helihopper scudded over a cultivated area of considerable extent, fields stretching below in a vague random checkerboard of lighter and darker earth, an undefined cluster of buildings at their center. There was a central bonfire that burned like a wild red eve

against the lower gloom, and in its plunging ruddy glow he made out an urgent scurrying of shadowy figures.

"I'm passing over a hamlet," Farrell reported. "The one nearest the city, I think. There's something odd going on down—"

Catastrophe struck so suddenly that he was caught completely unprepared. The helihopper's flimsy carriage bucked and crumpled. There was a blinding flare of electric discharge, a pungent stink of ozone and a stunning shock that flung him headlong into darkness.

He awoke slowly with a brutal headache and a conviction of nightmare heightened by the outlandish tone of his surroundings. He lay on a narrow bed in a whitely antiseptic infirmary, an oblong metal cell cluttered with a grimly utilitarian array of tables and lockers and chests. The lighting was harsh and overbright and the air hung thick with pungent unfamiliar chemical odors. From somewhere, far off yet at the same time as near as the bulkhead above him, came the unceasing drone of machinery.

Farrell sat up, groaning, when full consciousness made his position clear. He had been shot down by God knew what sort of devastating unorthodox weapon and was a prisoner in the grounded ship.

At his rising, a white-smocked fat man with anachronistic spec-

tacles and close-cropped gray hair came into the room, moving with the professional assurance of a medic. The man stopped short at Farrell's stare and spoke; his words were utterly unintelligible, but his gesture was unmistakable.

Farrell followed him dumbly out of the infirmary and down a bare corridor whose metal floor rang coldly underfoot. An open port near the corridor's end relieved the blankness of wall and let in a flood of reddish Alphardian sunlight; Farrell slowed to look out, wondering how long he had lain unconscious, and felt panic knife at him when he saw Xavier's scouter lying, port open and undefended, on the square outside.

The mechanical had been as easily taken as himself, then. Stryker and Gibson, for all their professional caution, would fare no better—they could not have overlooked the capture of Farrell and Xavier, and when they tried as a matter of course to rescue them the *Marco* would be struck down in turn by the same weapon.

The fat medic turned and said something urgent in his unintelligible tongue. Farrell, dazed by the enormity of what had happened, followed without protest into an intersecting way that led through a bewildering succession of storage rooms and hydroponics gardens, through a small gymnasium fitted with physical training equipment in graduated sizes and finally into

a soundproofed place that could have been nothing but a nursery.

The implication behind its presence stopped Farrell short.

"A creche," he said, stunned. He had a wild vision of endless generations of children growing up in this dim and stuffy room, to be taught from their first toddling steps the functions they must fulfill before the venture of which they were a part could be consummated.

One of those old ventures *had* succeeded, he thought, and was awed by the daring of that thousand-year odyssey. The realization left him more alarmed than before—for what technical marvels might not an isolated group of such dogged specialists have developed during a millennium of application?

Such a weapon as had brought down the helihopper and scouter was patently beyond reach of his own latter-day technology. Perhaps, he thought, its possession explained the presence of these people here in the first stronghold of the Hymenops; perhaps they had even fought and defeated the Bees on their own invaded ground.

He followed his white-smocked guide through a power room where great crude generators whirred ponderously, pouring out gross electric current into arm-thick cables. They were nearing the bow of the ship when they passed by another open port and Farrell, glancing out over the lowered rampway, saw that his fears for Stryker

and Gibson had been well grounded.

The *Marco Four*, ports open, lay grounded outside.

Farrell could not have said, later, whether his next move was planned or reflexive. The whole desperate issue seemed to hang suspended for a breathless moment upon a hair-fine edge of decision, and in that instant he made his bid.

Without pausing in his stride he sprang out and through the port and down the steep plane of the ramp. The rough stone pavement of the square drummed underfoot; sore muscles tore at him, and weakness was like a weight about his neck. He expected momentarily to be blasted out of existence.

He reached the *Marco Four* with the startled shouts of his guide ringing unintelligibly in his ears. The port yawned; he plunged inside and stabbed at controls without waiting to seat himself. The ports swung shut. The ship darted up under his manipulation and arrowed into space with an acceleration that sprung his knees and made his vision swim blackly.

He was so weak with strain and with the success of his coup that he all but fainted when Stryker, his scanty hair tousled and his fat face comical with bewilderment, stumbled out of his sleeping cubicle and bellowed at him.

"What the hell are you doing, Arthur? Take us down!"

Farrell gaped at him, speechless.

Stryker lumbered past him and took the controls, spiraling the *Marco Four* down. Men swarmed outside the ports when the Reclamations craft settled gently to the square again. Gibson and Xavier reached the ship first; Gibson came inside quickly, leaving the mechanical outside making patient explanations to an excited group of Alphardians.

Gibson put a reassuring hand on Farrell's arm. "It's all right, Arthur. There's no trouble."

Farrell said dumbly, "I don't understand. They didn't shoot you and Xav down too?"

It was Gibson's turn to stare.

"No one shot you down! These people are primitive enough to use metallic power lines to carry electricity to their hamlets, an anachronism you forgot last night. You piloted the heli-hopper into one of those lines, and the crash put you out for the rest of the night and most of today. These Alphardians are friendly, so desperately happy to be found again that it's really pathetic."

"Friendly? That torpedo—"

"It wasn't a torpedo at all," Stryker put in. Understanding of the error under which Farrell had labored erased his earlier irritation, and he chuckled commiseratingly. "They had one small boat left for emergency missions, and sent it up to contact us in the fear that we might overlook their settlement

and move on. The boat was atomic powered, and our shield screens set off its engines."

Farrell dropped into a chair at the chart table, limp with reaction. He was suddenly exhausted, and his head ached dullly.

"We cracked the communications problem early last night," Gibson said. "These people use an ancient system of electromagnetic wave propagation called frequency modulation, and once Lee and I rigged up a suitable transceiver the rest was simple. Both Xav and I recognized the old language; the natives reported your accident, and we came down at once."

"They really came from Terra? They lived through a thousand years of flight?"

"The ship left Terra for Sirius in 2171," Gibson said. "But not with these people aboard, or their ancestors. That expedition perished after less than a light-year when its hydroponics system failed. The Hymenops found the ship derelict when they invaded us, and brought it to Alphard Six in what was probably their first experiment with human subjects. The ship's log shows clearly what happened to the original complement. The rest is deducible from the situation here."

Farrell put his hands to his temples and groaned. "The crash must have scrambled my wits. Gib, where did they come from?"

"From one of the first peripheral colonies conquered by the Bees," Gibson said patiently.

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'The Hymenops were long-range planners, remember, and masters of hypnotic conditioning. They stocked the ship with a captive crew of Terrans conditioned to believe themselves descendants of the original crew, and grounded it here in disabled condition. They left for Alphard Five then, to watch developments.

"Succeeding generations of colonists grew up accepting the fact that their ship had missed Sirius and made planetfall here—they still don't know where they really are—by luck. They never knew about the Hymenops, and they've struggled along with an inadequate technology in the hope that a later expedition would find them. They found the truth hard to take, but they're eager to enjoy the fruits of Terran assimilation."

Stryker, grinning, brought Farrell a frosted drink that tinkled invitingly. "An unusually fortunate ending to a Hymenop experiment," he said. These people progressed normally because they've been let alone. Reorienting them will be a simple

matter; they'll be properly spoiled colonists within another generation."

Farrell sipped his drink appreciatively.

"But I don't see why the Bees should go to such trouble to deceive these people. Why did they sit back and let them grow as they pleased, Gib? It doesn't make sense!"

"But it does, for once," Gibson said. "The Bees set up this colony as a control unit to study the species they were invading, and they had to give their specimens a normal—if obsolete—background in order to determine their capabilities. The fact that their experiment didn't tell them what they wanted to know may have had a direct bearing on their decision to pull out."

Farrell shook his head. "It's a reverse application, isn't it of the old saw about Terrans being incapable of understanding an alien culture?"

"Of course," said Gibson, surprised. "It's obvious enough, surely—hard as they tried, the Bees never understood us either."

THE END



CONTROL GROUP



LEE BROWN COYE

the

# FORELIFE

Illustrator COYE



*In the white plaza the  
figures suddenly  
sparked into existence.  
And the old man  
and the young girl  
wondered anew  
about the truth of legend.*

SEER Wirther had been lecturing for several hours to his students on *Some Methods of Moving Toward Eternity* when a young female rose in the back tier and said, "Seer, you have given us much interesting, useful information for the future of our souls, whatever they may be, but—."

Here she glanced uneasily at the rows of ghostly faces tipped upward toward her and, in turn, the wise one looked benignly down at her. "Yes, Miss Tarns?"

"Well," she resumed hastily as if speed would prevent them from reacting overstrongly to her words, "well, you haven't said a word about our *pasts*, about why across the ages there have been rumors of people from whom we may have sprung."

Everyone snickered and some

By ALBERT TEICHNER

students even guffawed their contempt for such a notion, but Wirther preserved his scholarly demeanor.

"Your fellow students should not laugh so heartily, Miss Tarns. Undoubtedly most of them have believed—or half-believed—this ancient myth at one time or another. However, it does remain a myth, and more most frequently babbled by the senile just before they pass from this world."

Miss Tarns remained standing. "Isn't that a sheerly negative approach, Seer Wirther? I mean, hardly anybody ever takes seriously the question of our origins, where we came from. Isn't there a mystery to it?" Some of the students wriggled about uneasily and had to snicker themselves back into a mood of relaxed comfort. "Suddenly we're here in the world, some large, some small, some highly articulate, some incoherent and waiting to be educated. Don't you ever wonder about how it happened?"

The Seer was all good-natured tolerance. "There's an important branch of philosophy, Miss Tarns, that concerns itself with unanswerable problems like that one. It has shown, in every case, that these are pseudo-problems because they are based on pseudo-questions. In other words, if a question means nothing, the

answer will be just as empty." He tented his hands over the lectern. "We don't come from anywhere. We merely, all of a sudden, happen, have existence, and grow from that beginning through this life, then move on to the unseeable next one."

"All right, suppose I reverse that?" Miss Tarns set her jaw determinedly.

"Reverse it?"

"Yes. I could say we come from a previous life and there is none after ghostness is past!"

"You can't say that!" "Heresy!" "You *shouldn't* say that!" The whole class had sprung to noisy life, each student offering a different reason for objecting.

"We will try to disregard your last remark," the Seer informed her. "Now then, has anyone present ever been in a haunted place, ever *seen* a human person?"

Once more there was uneasiness. But this time the uneasy ones did not laugh.

"Have you, Miss Tarns?"

"Uh—well, not exactly."

"Not exactly. Not exactly." Wirther rolled the words in his mouth like a slowly melting confection. Suddenly he whirled to face another quarter of the hall, long cloak swirling with the movement, and pointed toward a young man who had risen to speak. "Yes, Mr. Staw. Have you managed to see one?"

"Oh no, Seer, not at all." Staw shuffled his right foot back and forth, somewhat abashed. When he had overcome his embarrassment he went on. "I just wanted to show Miss Tarns the error of this superstition."

SHE had been gazing interestingly across the room at him but now all respect disappeared. "I resent being called superstitious by a student of my own level."

He retreated a little. "I'm sorry if it sounded that way."

"It did. It does."

"Well, what I meant was that I could prove the widespread belief—you see, Miss Tarns, I am saying belief for your sake, not superstition—I could prove it to be unscientific and therefore in error."

"Go ahead, young man," Wirther nodded, amused.

Staw held out his hand. "Here is a solid part of my being, a hand. It exists in a five-dimensional manifold, three of space, two of time. This is the only dimension manifold in which it could exist until we achieve some Afterlife. Right, Miss Tarns?"

Her glance had once more softened toward him. "I agree, Mr. Staw. So far."

"Good. Now here is the back of a chair in front of me. I tighten my fingers on it and they find resistance in its solidity. They

do not pass through this matter. Now then, can stories of 'people' be true?" Excited by the iron-clad strength of his evidence, he plunged on without waiting for an answer. "In such stories we always hear about someone—almost never the storyteller but someone else—suddenly seeing buildings and landscapes and corridors somewhat like our own except that these 'things' pass *through* the things of our world! And, to crown it all, this someone else has also seen frightening 'people,' beings somewhat like us in outline, beings supposedly our ancestors, who pass right through our walls, even through us ourselves! How can something of five dimensions pass through this chairback or this hand?"

"Right!" the other students shouted. "There's your answer!"

"I—I don't know, of course. It's just that there has to be something to it if there have been such stories since the beginning of recorded history and—and—." She abruptly sat down, her frustration exceeded only by her sense of defeat.

Looking equally defeated—if for different reasons—Staw sat down also and Seer Wirther said, "Your refutation of Miss Tarns' contention is an effective one, Mr. Staw, but I chose to avoid that sort of contention since I wished to show that the

argument against 'people' can be successfully made in logical terms alone without referring to physical reality. It is now, I believe, time for class to be dismissed."

Already starting to forget what they had just heard, the other students hurried out but Tarns held back in the hope of avoiding some offhanded sarcasms from any of them. One other ghost, though, remained, a man much too old to be a student, who had slipped up to the lectern and was now engaged in a sibilantly-whispered debate with Wirther. Shrugging, Tarns gave up all attempts at overhearing them once the tiers had emptied out and herself hurried into the hall. There she bumped squarely into Staw who was waiting for her.

"I don't have anything to say to you," she snapped, tossing her head.

"Sure you do," he pleaded. "Whatever disagreements we have in the classroom, we can still be good friends outside it, can't we?"

"That is what you choose to think. For my part, I don't like being made fun of in front of everybody."

He firmly grasped her shoulder. "There wasn't any making fun about it. I just didn't want you to go on talking until a lot of students started hollering you

must be a silly superstitionist."

"I may be silly, that's for you to decide, but I've never been superstitious." She tried to break loose from him without success.

"Of course, you haven't been. I'm only trying to protect you from slanderous reactions." He pulled his hand away. "I'd think you'd be grateful for it, not ripping away at me."

"All right," she relented. "Still friends even though your arguments were all beside the point."

HE started to answer but was saved from the danger of renewed hostilities by the appearance of Seer Wirther. He was coming down the corridor with the elderly man. They had both tucked up their academic robes, glistening a high white which seemed twice as bright as the average layman's, and were attacking each other so vociferously that the two youngsters were passed unnoticed.

"Lorwyn, I'm always pleased to have distinguished guests sit in on my classes," Wirther was saying, "but I never expected a mathematician, a rigorous thinker, to show the slightest interest —and favorable interest at that! —in idle superstition."

"Wirther, I used to wonder precisely how presumptuous the philosophical mind could get. Now you've shown me!"

They were moving slowly away from the students, still absorbed in each other's fallacious reasonings. "Lorwyn, facts are facts—you were the very man who once refuted the probability statistics 'proving' our minds had supersensory capacities, could even contact a mythical past existence supposed to be as real as our future one. Is that part of my presuming?"

"Not at all," he said, rocking his long, bony head up and down. "I don't believe in logical proofs of the supernatural and whenever I come across such falsified logic I fight it. But you can't logically prove such things don't exist either. The question of a previous life is a religious one—so is that of reported 'people' sightings. They're matters of belief based on unexplainable experiences, even on sheer faith. Logic is totally beside the point in this area."

"It certainly has nothing to do with *your* beliefs," shouted the Seer as they went into his office, slamming the door behind them.

Staw gaped, unbelieving. "That was Lorwyn—do you have any idea who he is?"

"I've heard vaguely of him, something to do with mathematics. I hope you noticed he wasn't so cocksure against human people."

"Something to do with math—? Why, he's one of the very

greatest math-men! Imagine, even great thinkers can have crazy lapses!"

"Not crazy at all." The beautiful bones of her face shone triumphantly through the thin skin. "We supernaturalists can't all be such fools if a Lorwyn thinks there might be something to hauntings."

They were now passing the door to Wirther's office. Staw hesitated as he heard protesting shouts intermixed with friendly laughter coming from within. But it was now her turn to give a condescending smile and he hurried along before she could call him a chronic eavesdropper.

Outside, the sun in all its watery radiance was casting a rich pall of whiteness over the city. The youthful couple stood for a while at the head of the university's great flight of steps, gazing over the vast square and low roofs beyond to the almost transparent, gold-hued cupola of the Funerarium that dominated the city's horizon in that quarter. This was where the bodies of the dead were evaporated for release into the certain but unfathomable realities of the Afterworld. Staw's intent gaze seemed to be saying, 'There, there's the proof nothing could be more grossly substantial than we are in this life.' And Tarns' eyes, turning toward his, seemed to answer, 'It makes me wonder why, if we

are so much more thickly physical than the Afterworld's inhabitants, why can't there be creatures even more grossly constructed than us?"

**A**S they spoke silently to each other, there was an equally soundless *Splink!* of light at one of the nearer corners of the square and, on the edge of an instant, an elderly woman was standing there. Then sparks of light were breaking through all about her, like exploding fire-crackers seen at too great a distance to be heard, and other living ghostlings, hewn from God's void, sprang up around the first.

"Two little boys!" Tarns exclaimed, close to ecstasy at the beauty of the birthing moment.

"And three erect young men!" Staw joined in. "And a young woman holding a baby!"

"I've only seen it happen twice," Tarns sighed. "And each time there was just one person."

"Beautiful, beautiful," said someone behind them and they turned to find Lorwyn standing there. "I'm a very old man and I've seen a few cases where they appeared in a large group as well as hundreds where a lone ghostling came into being—look, thirty-four of them now!—but it's always beautiful. What can be more wonderful than the appearance of new inhabitants in our world?"

"And more mysterious," the young woman said, staring in awe as the group gathered itself together and turned off from the plaza area, already instinctually aware of the right way to go to reach the place of initial indoctrination. As the last back, that of a small girl, disappeared around a vaulting balustrade, Tarns smiled at the younger of her two companions. "Don't you find it the least bit mysterious?"

"No, not really," he answered. "In fact, not at all. Wonderful? Yes. But mysterious? No! This is just how we come into the world. Whatever is is and that's that. You don't have to scurry around after a supernatural explanation when no explanation is needed."

"Ah!" Lorwyn grinned. "Now I recognize the two of you, the debaters in the classroom. Good to see young minds biting off more than they can chew. You know, you two got me into a ripsnorting debate with my old friend."

"I know," Staw said, then looked embarrassed. "I mean we couldn't help overhearing a little of your discussion with Seer Wirther—."

"No need to apologize, ghostling—."

Staw looked hurt. "I'm not really all that young, Dr. Lorwyn. I appeared as a child and have had a long growth process.

Whereas Miss Tarns here appeared only two suncycles ago, partly matured at birth."

"Sorry if I offended either of you. I'm so old—when I appeared I was already very old—well, I'm so antiquated that *everybody* looks ghostling young to me."

AS soon as they exchanged introductions, Tarns launched into a statement of principles, hardly pausing for intakes of air. "I was so proud to see someone of your intellectual standing, Dr. Lorwyn, agreeing with what I said and showing the 'pure' reasoners where they've overdone their skinny faith by refusing to recognize there must be a Forelife in which living beings—yes, the people of supposed myths!—reach various levels, then pass on to us, and in a glorious case like the one we just saw some particular disaster of that life may send them on to us in one lot and—."

"Wait, wait, young lady," Lorwyn broke in. "I didn't say I believed in the existence of people."

"There you are," Staw chortled, "I knew nobody of your intelligence could swallow any of that."

"Another presuming would-be philosopher," the old man snapped. "I didn't say they are mythical either. I merely indi-

cated we should keep an open mind on the matter. There have been many cases of reputable people claiming to have seen them haunting us and even to have received meaningful emanations from them."

"There you are!" she came back at her fellow student. "Reputable people—."

"Of course," Lorwyn went on, "they could have been mistaken. Many explanations have been offered for such phenomena—mental breakdown, tricks of light, deliberate trickery imposed on the viewers and so forth." He considered their expressions, both of disappointment now, with amusement. "An open mind, I see, doesn't always spread happiness before it!"

She disregarded the attempt to lighten the atmosphere and started down the steps, forcing the men to follow her if they wanted to continue the discussion to a cleancut conclusion. "My theory could begin to explain a lot of things. We would no longer need the ether-void to account for the birthing moment of all ghosts. We could describe why ghostlings appear at different stages of development. Plenty of oddities would have explanations."

"What, for example?" Staw laughed.

She hesitated but went on as soon as she saw the older man

also was grinning skeptically. "All right, what about male and female?"

"Well, what about it?"

"Why does every ghostling appear on one side of the sexual line or another. Why two sexes?"

"But the reason is obvious," said Lorwyn. "Some ghosts are male to supply the logical, factual emphasis to our society, some female to cement it into a workable oneness with superior capacities for affection and general intuitive emotion."

"In this life, yes," she said impatiently. "But in the Fore-life there could have been some other reason."

They both looked shocked at her. "This sort of loose reasoning simply won't do, young lady," Lorwyn exclaimed. "There is no mystery about sex. It serves exactly the natural purpose I stated, nothing more or less. What other purpose could it possibly have served in a Fore-life, if there is such a life?"

For a moment she was genuinely bewildered and had to confess, "I haven't the slightest idea." But then her confidence returned. "I just have the feeling, the very strong feeling, that it served some other purpose back there that we'll never be able to imagine. Plenty of reasons for things must exist that we'll never be able even to imagine."

They were now at the bottom of the steps and started to move across the square. "I must continue this discussion with you, young lady—now. My original intention was to go home and relax but I can't let someone drift around in such a haze of misconceptions. You, it turns out, are even more dogmatic than your friend!" Despite his age he increased his pace, moving ahead of them, and they remained at a respectful distance behind since it was obvious he wanted some time to think by himself. When they reached the other side of the great plaza he stopped to let them catch up.

WHY do you insist on explaining *everything* with supernatural causes?" he suddenly demanded.

"I—I would never go that far," she stuttered.

"You seem to, Miss Tarns. You cannot remain satisfied with your hypothesis that we spring from a world of people, whatever they are. No, you must use it to account for *every* natural thing about us. Sex is so obviously, so naturally, a purely psychological phenomenon, yet you must make it spring from something else that is not itself proven to a certainty!"

"I only chose that as an example," she retreated, "an example of how all our thinking

could be affected by acceptance of Forelife."

He gestured toward a narrow roadway and they followed him up the alley between tall buildings that cast decreasingly pale shadows as they moved deeper into it. "The shortest way to the park," he said. "We can sit down there and really thrash everything out."

"What I'd like to know is what 'people' sighting stories really tell us," Staw broke in. "What, for example, are the conditions of alleged sightings? Where do they most frequently take place?"

"All sorts of conditions," she said before more questions could be strung onto those two. "Usually the sighter is alone when it happens but sometimes there are a few ghosts together who catch a glimpse of the haunting. Observers usually report seeing something like us yet at the same time different, of some different order of matter and differently dressed. As for places, you know as well as I do that they're reported in all kinds of settings. Why shouldn't they be, don't we have birth moments take place in all kinds of places, not just the central plaza?"

"Aha!" the old man pounced. "You reveal your thought processes so overcompletely! Right away you have to subordinate a natural phenomenon, the birth

process of our species, with a supernatural one, the appearance of 'people' in, allegedly, all sorts of places in *our* world!"

She tried to control her mounting exasperation. "Dr. Lorwyn, whose side are you on in this matter?" They turned a bend into a more deeply shadowed area. "I assumed you agreed with me. Now, though, you keep picking away at everything I say!"

His smile was all tolerant sagacity. "I am not on any 'side,' as you put it. I just say we should all keep an open mind. Once when I was but a few turns around the sun past my birthing I thought I experienced a people sighting but soon came to realize it had been in a dream. It taught me, though, to be more objective about the *possibility*—."

"I want to know," she demanded, "whether you believe in the existence of people or not!"

"There's much to be said on the one hand," he wavered, "and much to be said on the other too."

Now the younger man was impatient too. "You must *tend* one way or the other, though."

"Ah youth," he smiled, "youth always believes a definite answer is possible to any question."

"Why not?" she said crisply. "All I want to know is—and Mr.

Staw does too, evidently—which way you'd lean if you had to make a choice?"

"I don't particularly care to make a choice—."

"But there's no such thing as being *completely* impartial on an important issue, not for a living being!"

Her last remark stung him a little and he said quickly in a low, confessional voice, "Well, if I had to make a choice, I'd have to say I tend to the belief that Forelife people do not exist."

"Ah, good!" Staw exulted.

"I only say tend, you understand—."

He stopped, jaw dangling in unaccustomed horror, and his young companions froze, too, in their tracks. Directly ahead of them a room-sized elongated box of darkness lay across the alley's shadows which were alabaster white in comparison and this box seemed to extend right through the walls on each side, visible through the walls to its own farthest limits.

A ROOM of sheer void but now permitting lighter patches to half-emerge like an impossible birthing that would never completely happen but leave pieces sticking into natural reality while the greater part remained in the womb of nothingness. But one small patch became still more distinct. It seemed to be a

translucent material on which little figures were moving, figures that were indistinct but looked almost like ordinary ghosts except for their size and strange styles of movement and dress.

Then a much larger patch at the other end of the box lightened and the figures were explained. Seated, facing the translucent material, were something like a man and woman and, for some strange reason, the man had an arm tightly around the woman as they watched the varying translucency surface. Oddly dressed and strange in their movements, too, they were too unghostly to be believed, yet there they were, just like the people so often reported, so seldom seen, and these large people made understandable what the smaller ones on the translucent screen were and—

Miss Tarns' face glowed its deepest fright and she managed one chilling scream before her jaw froze in its open position. Both men started to say something comforting but the alien horror froze them, too.

And then the people of the black box seemed, in return, to be considering them with equal horror, eyes wide, smudgy-completed faces deeper than ever into visible darkness! The moment itself froze within some unit of time more basic than any

of them could know. After which normal time returned and the room box *Splunked!* out of existence.

They blinked into the normal shadowiness of the alley and slowly came back to life. "No, say nothing now." Lorwyn rubbed his eyes and sighed. "Nothing. I know you saw what I did but we have to keep our minds clear of entanglements and not lose one bit of the experience. Follow me."

Even as he gave one last glance at the empty space between the walls, he swung around and started down the alley. They came round the bend and could see the square looming up ahead, all glowing whiteness, with the great flight of stairs to the university beyond it. Nothing had to be said about where they were going.

When they finally started up the steps Staw had to mutter under his breath, "Impossible, it couldn't be!" and Tarns answered, "But it was, it was!" while Lorwyn grimly shook his head for silence.

Then they were back in the building they had left a mere half hour before and standing by the door that led into Seer Wirther's office suite. Lorwyn knocked and the Seer looked happily surprised as they entered. "What," he roared, "all my argumentative friends in one

batch! Did you come together?"

"We've already met," Lorwyn muttered, tightening his fists until the last hint of a shiver disappeared from them. "Something—,"

"It proves—," she broke in.

"Must be explanation—," Staw in turn exclaimed.

"No, please, young people, let me, the more objective one, tell the story. Wirther, you've known me a long time, you know I can be objective."

"Yes, certainly."

"Well, you also know the park-ward alley across the square. We were just in it and we saw something, *the* thing!" Once more restraining the youngsters from interrupting, he went through the episode in minutest detail. Every once in a while the Seer gave a disbelieving tsk-tsk but Lorwyn went right on. It took over fifteen minutes for him to describe every bit of what he remembered.

YOU'VE told me everything possible about your alleged sighting, Lorwyn, except one thing. From all you've said I cannot tell how long all this took to happen. In fact, I'm more confused on that point than if your documentation had been brief-er."

"Why, there's nothing odd about that, Wirther. It was all in a split flash."

"There you are," Wirthner said.  
"What do you mean, 'There  
you are'?"

"In such a brief time your  
conscious mind could not absorb  
so much information, now could  
it?"

"That's right," Staw slowly  
nodded. "Something's wrong—."

"Not necessarily," said Lorwyn.  
"Ordinary time seemed to  
be beside the point. It was the  
briefest second of *our* time but  
there seemed to be some su-  
perior time scale at work that con-  
trolled both the people inside the  
vision and us."

"Excellent, excellent," Wirth-  
ner said soothingly. "Let me ap-  
proach the matter from another  
angle. Mr. Staw, did you seem to  
observe what Dr. Lorwyn has  
just described?"

The younger man hesitated,  
then grudgingly said, "It seemed  
exactly the same to me."

The Seer shrugged off his brief  
disappointment. "What about  
you, Miss Tarns."

"It was exactly the same to  
me!"

"There you are," he repeated.  
"After this supposed vision the  
three of you discussed—."

"We didn't," Lorwyn insisted  
earnestly. "Look, Wirthner, I'm  
as eager as you are to find a ra-  
tional explanation for this but  
the truth is I wouldn't permit  
them any discussion until we  
got back here so all possibility of

mutual suggestion was elimi-  
nated."

"But it wasn't eliminated,"  
smiled the Seer. "These young-  
sters had no clear idea of what  
they had 'seen' until they heard  
your account just now, an ac-  
count which filled all the blanks  
in *their* experience of it."

"That's ridiculous!" Miss  
Tarns exploded. "I know per-  
fectly well what I saw. There  
were people and they exist, they  
really exist!"

"You know perfectly well what  
you *think* you saw," he correct-  
ed. "Dr. Lorwyn is a man of the  
highest reputation and greatest  
probity. Naturally you would be  
influenced—."

"True enough," Staw agreed.  
"—and, Lorwyn, don't think  
I'm impugning your motives but  
didn't you say earlier today that  
there are brief periods nowadays  
when you feel very tired? 'Utter-  
ly weary of things as they are'  
was the way you put it."

"I did," he admitted. "Oh, look  
here, Wirthner, I'm not saying  
with absolute certainty that we  
saw *people*. But I am certain we  
were severely shaken up by  
something."

I AGREE one hundred percent  
to that, my friend. But let me  
ask you one thing and here I'll  
stake my whole argument on  
your answering yes. Weren't the  
three of you discussing the 'peo-

ple-haunting' myth as you entered the alley and as you proceeded down it?"

"Yes. Yes, I do see your point."

"And you had also seen a mass birthing, not a unique sight, to be sure, but certainly a relatively rare one in any individual ghost's lifetime, a birthing which Miss Tarns in her vast ingenuity undoubtedly managed to connect with her engagingly vivid theories."

"So we did imagine it after all, didn't we?" Staw said, relieved.

"We did not!" she shouted. "Oh, the intolerable smugness of your thinking, refusing to see anything not covered by your ideas!"

"Mustn't excite yourself this way," Lorwyn mumbled. He straightened up and became more decisive. "You must be right, Wirther. I'm glad we straightened it out. For a while, though, you can't imagine how real they were—mind you, I'm not denying the possibility of something like that really existing, Miss Tarns, just its unlikelihood. Very frightening thing to deceive yourself—."

"We were not deceived!"

"These were like figures in a dream," Wirther went on implacably. "They moved to the music of your suggestibility and when that was exhausted, being

creatures of the lowest and most transient order of appearances, vanished."

"Not of a lower order," she said, calmer now. "They had to be of at least as high an order of reality as we are."

"Why?" the Seer asked.

"Because I experienced one thing these two obviously did not. I sensed what the people were communicating to each other."

"And what was that?"

"At first in that incredible second when they saw us they were frightened and then the man began to think something about some myth story they had been recently watching on the translucent screen and he said to her one thing that made her secure again. He said, 'They do not exist. They are figments of your imagination!'"

For a moment the men were chalk white, appalled by the unexpectedness of what she had just said, but then the Seer gave his broadest smile of all. "Which is the final proof that none of this actually happened." The other men began to laugh also. "Could there be anything more absurd, Miss Tarns, than the notion that we only exist in their imaginations?"

It was another question that could not receive an answer.

And it did not.

**THE END**



ILLUSTRATOR  
VARGA

# Made In Archerius

By NEAL BARRETT, JR.

THE Colonel's staff car pulled hurriedly away from the curb, leaving a gray hedge of exhaust rooted to the boiling street. Hurstmiér smiled, watch-

ing until the car became an OD blob in the stream of traffic. He waited another minute, then stepped from behind a parked van and took the

*Did you ever hear  
the story about  
the traveling sales-  
man? No, we mean  
this one...*

marble steps four at a time.

It was noon, and the hospital lobby was nearly empty. An aged nurse snoozed behind the admitting desk and three bored reporters lounged by the elevators munching packaged sandwiches. Hurstmier received a swift, cursory glance as he passed. He pressed the button, waited, and took the self-service to five.

The dark-browed sergeant wore a burp-gun over his shoulder and a forty-five on his belt. He looked miserably uncomfortable squeezed behind the tiny field desk. As Luke Hurstmier approached, dark eyes glared at him from under the heavy steel helmet. While the eyes took him in from head to toe, thick fingers rubbed carefully across his credentials.

Luke waited patiently. He had been through the routine exactly eight times. He had long ago decided the man was hand-picked for the maddening procedure by Colonel "Tiger Jack" Starrett.

Finally, the sergeant frowned, touching the grip of his forty-five suggestively. He had concluded, reluctantly, Luke guessed, that there was no valid excuse to shoot one L. Hurstmier, as he highly resembled the face on his ID card, which matched the card's mate in his desk file. He was allowed to pass, the sergeant giving no indica-

tion he had ever laid eyes on Luke before.

At the end of the long hall, Luke stopped before the plain gray door. He rang three times and the door opened quietly, letting him into the semi-darkness. Luke blinked in the half-light. Two technicians glanced up and he nodded to them without speaking. Behind him, the cameras whirred softly and the tapes revolved on silent spindles.

As he stepped before the one-way mirror, Luke felt the familiar tightening in his chest. He watched as Ben Hooker bent over the huge, oversized bed. The figure on the bed was sleeping. As usual in this case.

Six days before, though it seemed longer to Luke, Morph of Archerius had landed in upper Maryland. His spaceship was under heavy guard at Luke's laboratory in Aberdeen and Morph was interned with a fractured leg and respiratory complications in the biggest bed Johns Hopkins had been able to throw together. Luke decided he should be used to Morph by now. He should, but he wasn't. Morph was not easy to get used to.

As Luke watched, Morph stretched and yawned, bringing his over-long forearms above his head and extending his length to a frightening twelve and a half feet. His body was covered with thick, shaggy fur, his small,

round head nearly hidden in a mass of heavy hair. More than anything, he resembled a large, very tired sloth.

Luke scowled at the sleeping figure. Since Morph's arrival, mile upon mile of copy had been written about him; newspaper, radio and TV had exhausted every conceivable angle and aspect of the first alien to land on Earth. Every angle except one, thought Luke.

If anyone else had noticed it, they had forgotten it in the general excitement and confusion of Morph's arrival, or, more likely, ignored it out of convenience. But Luke hadn't forgotten. It had puzzled and disturbed him from the very beginning—

*—How, he asked himself, does a big hairy slob who sleeps eighteen hours a day, find time to invent an interstellar drive?*

Dr. Ben Hooker shed his anti-septic suit and mask, lit a cigarette, and stepped into his office. Luke Hurstmier half opened his eyes as Ben entered. He was stretched in an armchair, his feet on Ben's desk.

"How's Sleeping Beauty?" asked Luke.

"Sleeping," said Ben, "and I'm not supposed to tell *you* even that much. Mr. Hurstmier will receive pertinent information regarding the medical aspect of

our patient through authorized liaison reports."

Luke stared in mock surprise. "Let me guess. You've been talking to 'Tiger Jack' Starrett again."

Ben shook his head. "Wrong. He's been talking to me. What exactly are you trying to do, anyway, get an old man canned?"

Luke grinned. Ben waved a thick sheaf of papers under his nose.

"Somehow, he knows I've been letting a certain engineer read Morph's medical charts. He also knows the engineer is Luke Hurstmier. He is not at all happy."

"I imagine not," Luke mused. "I've been dodging him about three days now. I think he's unhappy about something."

"Uh, yes," Ben said dryly, "I'd say that. At least."

"Does this by any chance mean you are cutting off my source of information?" asked Luke.

Ben glanced up sharply. "Now why would I want to do a thing like that? Just to keep my job?"

"I won't be offended," Luke said bravely, "it's all part of the general trend. During the last twenty-four hours I have managed to get myself banned by Interrogations & Records, General Data and Central Filing."

"Perhaps," Ben suggested, stuffing his pipe, "you are making a nuisance of yourself."

"Perhaps. At any rate, you now have your choice of retaining our week-old friendship or knuckling under to the growing anti-Hurstmier faction. In which case, I shall go to the head of the hospital and reveal that you are holding six nurses captive in your laboratory for immoral purposes."

"Paagh!" scowled Ben. "I must be even older than *you* think I am; I'm neither gratified by your flattery or aroused by the concept behind it. I don't suppose you could just come right out and *tell* me what you want to know?"

"Several things. One, I want to know what exactly is the matter with Morph."

Ben straightened, running long fingers through his iron-gray hair. "Would it be improper to ask what this has to do with taking that drive unit apart?"

"I'll let you in on a little secret," said Luke. "Frankly, I don't think that drive unit is *supposed* to come apart.

"Starrett will be happy to hear that," Ben mused.

"No doubt. As for what I'm looking for, I'm not at all sure. There's something about Morph's ship that's very, very puzzling, and I feel the best way to find

out what it is is to find out as much as possible about Morph."

Ben studied the lanky young man with his hard, clinical eye.

"For instance?"

"Huh uh. I'm still in the hunch stage. That's about three flights below a for instance. Now. How about this Alien Flu?"

Ben winced. "It's a type of virus infection. You could have read that in the papers. Very similar to the several types human beings catch every day. It's transmitted through the body openings like flu or common cold. My guess is Archerians are very sensitive to respiratory infections; that's based on what we've learned about Morph in just six days, of course, but it's a safe enough guess. We've found old scars on Morph's lungs from repeated bouts with this thing—or something very much like it."

"Do you think it's ever fatal?"

"Could be," said Ben, "same as a cold or Asian flu could be fatal. I doubt if this thing is very often. I hope they haven't built a ship like that without discovering antibiotics," he added sourly.

"Well, don't count on it," said Luke. "Which came first, the A-bomb or the Salk Vaccine? I don't imagine we're a very unusual phenomenon. Now. What are you doing for it?"

"Well, treating it, of course!" Ben scowled, looked down, and began shuffling the papers on his desk, apparently annoyed by it all.

"I had hoped you were," said Luke, "but how?" He leaned back in his chair, grinning smugly at Ben. If he had learned nothing else from his previous visits with Ben Hooker he had learned the meaning of the shuffling of papers. Luke had obviously driven the conversation into an area the old man wasn't exactly eager to discuss, and the shuffling was the prelude to a stall.

"Of course," said Ben carefully, "it's quite difficult working on a completely foreign physiology, but Morph is responding very satisfactorily to our, ah, standard antibiotics..."

Luke grinned to himself. The old boy was certainly a lousy staller.

". . . Naturally, Morph's resemblance to our own order of Edentata is a lucky coincidence—for Morph and for us—he reacts in much the same way to drugs as our test animals. Actually, the big problem has been to convince about fifty anteaters, armadillos and sloths to catch Morph's infection."

"Well, I think you've done a grand job," said Luke acidly, recalling the roomful of sneezing

and coughing oddities he had seen in the hospital's basement. "Now if we can interrupt the Zoology lesson for a moment," he said, squaring himself in the chair, "how about telling me what you're *really* up to, friend?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Ben lied openly.

Luke shrugged. "Okay, forget it. This is definitely not my week, anyway. What about the fractured leg? Is that Top Secret, too?"

"A leg is a leg," Ben snapped. "It's knitting."

"Well, that's reassuring," said Luke, pulling himself out of the chair.

"Not leaving?" Ben urged.

"Yep. Got a few more agencies to intimidate before I get back to my little ole spaceship. Thanks for the information. Such as it was."

"Oh, certainly," said Ben pleasantly. "Come and pump me anytime."

At the door, Luke stopped and turned. "Oh, there was one more thing."

Ben snorted, shaking his head slowly. "Yes, I presumed there was. The thing you came for in the first place."

"You've been associating with Starrett too long. You're overly suspicious."

Ben crossed his hands on his lap, enjoying being on the other

end of the pump for a moment. "Sure I am. Now what was it?"

"I wonder if you would let me have a look at Morph's personal possessions. You know, the things he had on him when they brought him in."

"You've wasted your whole performance," Ben said smugly. "I haven't got 'em."

Luke slowly sat back down.

"Starrett took them two days ago," said Ben. "I assume Security has them by now. Why didn't you tell me you wanted them? I could have killed Starrett, fed him to Morph, and—"

"Oh, shut up," said Luke.

Starrett: Naturally, you understand that you do not have to answer any questions at all during these visits. You are in one of our finest hospitals, and we are doing our best to take care of you. You are our guest, not our prisoner. You understand that, don't you?

Morph: Most certainlies! Morph are most excellently cared. Your physicians are muchly good in their grasping hold of medicals. Will it give to me greatness amounts of pleasures to bring Archerian medicals to your medicals. Oh boy! Sure enough!

Starrett: Your people are quite advanced in the science of medicine?

Morph: Oh, certainlies. Surely.

Of course. All and everys come to joy in wondrous fine cures by Archerius' medical worldlies.

Starrett: Excuse me, Morph, I mean no offense, of course, but sometimes your translating device does not seem to, ah, give me the full meaning of what you say. This is no doubt due to my lack of familiarity with the instrument. Would you try to give me the meaning of your last phrase, "hospital worldlies"?

Morph: Yes! Yes! Oh why not is it? Archerius' possesses world for hospitals, world for physical typelies of science, world for all studies of learnliness. Is nothingness, really. Ho-hum, By God, yes! That's what it is.

(tape spliced and edited here—latter segment of interview continues.)

Starrett: . . . and these, spatial disturbances forced you to land on Earth?

Morph: Surely, surely. As I have before acquainted you, pal of my bosoms, I have been towardly Chericu Chester in next doorly Galaxy.

Starrett: As I understand, you were journeying toward a destination in another Galaxy, not this one? Is that so?

Morph: Oh, yes, yes, yes!

Starrett: How long does such a trip take, say, from here?

Morph: Oh, non-time, maybe muchly seem to be of three or fourness of day periods, but not truly a time, boy, just seemly to be.

Starrett: Then your drive does involve a faster-than-light principle?

Morph: Faster notly, oh buddy lover. Not so speedness like "fast" but speedness like placeness to placeness.

Starrett: You mean speed has no bearing, since you do not go *between* two points.

Morph: Ah, you have this too, eh?

Starrett: No, I meant, well— what is the principle behind this drive?

Morph: Morph is business-type man, not mechanic-wise. How the Hell am I knowing? Damned if I do. So what? Who can say?

Starrett: Then let me ask—

Luke swore wearily, leaned forward and cut off the tape. "Is muchly damned nonsense, Lieutenant."

The lieutenant stiffened. He pressed the rewind button, watched the tape spin on its reel, then carefully replaced it in a numbered plastic box. He started to close the box, hesitated, then looked up at Luke. He was young, and the two gold bars on

his neatly pressed shoulders gleamed brightly in Luke's eyes.

"Were there any more tapes you wished to hear, sir?"

Luke smiled patiently. The lieutenant had a nice way of putting it. He knew, of course, there were other tapes Luke wished to hear. About three dozen more, as the request list on his desk indicated. What he was trying to say was were there any more tapes *besides* the ones he wanted to hear.

Luke sighed, lit a cigarette, and blew smoke casually toward the ceiling. "Hmmm, well, do you happen to have any tapes or films on Morph's personal possessions?"

The young man cocked his head thoughtfully, then fingered through a card file on his desk. He withdrew a thin stack of cards, carefully marking his place. He held the cards well out of Luke's sight, shifting his glance from the cards to Luke to make certain he wasn't peeking. Finally, he shook his head firmly and placed the cards face down before him.

"I'm sorry, sir. There is no indication here that Engineering Personnel are authorized to see these films."

"I only wanted the one on Archerian currency," pleaded Luke.

The lieutenant shot him a puz-

zled glance, flicked through the cards again quickly, and said, "Sir, there is no film or tape on Archerian curren—" He stopped suddenly, the color rising in his cheeks.

Luke grinned triumphantly. The lieutenant swallowed nervously.

"Of course, I shall have to inform Colonel Starrett that I have inadvertently given you access to unauthorized information," he said sternly.

Luke stood up and leaned over the officer's desk. "Well, I won't tell if you won't," he grinned crookedly.

The lieutenant shook his head. "Thank you, sir. But I—must report all such incidents."

Luke started to speak, then caught the lieutenant's nervous glance toward the ceiling. He looked up. There was nothing to see but an air-conditioning ventilator. Luke frowned thoughtfully, then suddenly understood. No wonder Starrett was hot on his trail. He wondered if his own workshop was bugged, too. Probably. Certainly wouldn't want to be left out.

In the hall, he paused, pulled the thin shiny object from his pocket, and gazed thoughtfully at it for a long minute.

It was very late when he closed the door of his workshop and sank into the comfortable, grease-stained easy chair. It had

certainly been a fruitful day, he thought wearily. After leaving the young officer at Aural & Visual, he had managed to squeeze in Trade Relations, Alien Psychology and Speculative Studies before closing time. Of course, it was only a rough estimate, but he felt he had directly or indirectly antagonized at least fifty of sixty people at the three agencies. Not too bad.

Luke grinned. Speculative Studies had been rather close. He had nearly run over Colonel Starrett on the stairs.

Without looking up, Luke said, "'Morning, Colonel."

Starrett paused, his neatly clad frame poised just inside the doorway. "Oh, you were expecting me, were you?"

Luke glanced up from his desk, his eyes moving past the dazzling field of color on the crisp jacket and resting on the sharp, hawk-like face. "I'm not overly surprised," he said wearily. "Come on in. Grab a seat if you can find one."

Starrett glanced sharply all around the room, grimacing slightly at the tool-littered, grease-stained workbenches, finally choosing to stand. Luke repressed a smug, satisfied grin.

"How's it coming?" Starrett asked casually. He had moved to the center of the room, facing away from Luke toward the

smooth ovoid form of Morph's ship resting on blocks amid the clutter of the shop. Its unblemished gray surface stretched from fore to aft in a graceful twenty-foot curve. But the surface and the shape strongly resembled the four-foot drive unit on Luke's desk.

Luke stared at the ramrod back. "Oh, it's coming along fine," he said brightly, "we've established a basic premise to work from: We're quite certain the big shell is the ship and the little one is the drive."

Starrett jerked around, eyes glaring. "That's very funny. Or it would be if it weren't so damn close to the truth! What is holding things up, here, Hurstmier? You?"

Luke answered without looking up. "Lack of availability of pertinent data necessary for adequate analysis, Colonel. I think you know the answer to that one better than I do."

Starrett's eyes narrowed and his mouth tightened in a grim smile. "I see," he said hoarsely, "I see. When you were recommended for this project I was told you were a good engineer; that your methods were perhaps a little unorthodox, but nevertheless, quite competent. I'm afraid that description was a little inaccurate. You are not unorthodox, Hurstmier, you are unstable. If your so-called Daily Reports

were not proof enough, your—adventures of the past few days would more than confirm my opinion." His lips tightened over his teeth in a grim little smile. "I suggest we stop sparring around, Hurstmier. You are deliberately trying to sabotage this project. Why?"

Luke shook his head wearily, stood up and walked around his desk. He let one hand run over the smooth surface of the drive unit.

"You're wrong," he said, facing Starrett. "I have a very deep desire to find out what makes this ship tick. But I repeat: I don't think I can find out unless I am allowed to see the complete picture."

Starrett glared, his mouth pursing up in a sour curl. He paced around the edge of the ship and stopped a few inches from Luke.

"You think I am withholding information that might enable you to take this drive apart? Deliberately? Is that right?"

Luke nodded.

"I see. Well, you are correct," he beamed triumphantly. "Partially correct, anyway. I am withholding information, as you have so doggedly discovered. But *not* information pertinent to you. It is the stated policy of this project that each department be allowed to work inde-

pendently, without undue influence from each other. You are aware of this, of course, whether you choose to ignore it or not. The reason is simple: We want each group to discover as much as it can on its own. Come to its own conclusions. After we feel we have sufficient data, we certainly—"

"—will hand the pieces to a committee and stick them together with a pot of glue," finished Luke. "It doesn't work that way, Colonel. We're not taking inventory in a supermarket, we're trying to put together an alien civilization; find out as much as we can from available data."

Luke ignored the field of red creeping up the Colonel's face.

"You're going at it exactly backwards," he went on, "the classic example of the cart before the horse." Luke shook his head savagely. "Uh unh, you can't departmentalize a thing like this; *all* data is pertinent to *all* groups. As for me, if I can't get the data I need from you I'll continue to get it from whatever source is available."

Starrett let the breath whistle slowly out between his clenched teeth. "I see," he said ironically. "No doubt you feel this explains your need to examine anatomy charts, postage stamps and alien coins. All of these items are necessary to your investigation

of the drive unit. If you can give me a logical reason for those asinine requests piling up on my desk, Hurstmier, I'll give you Morph's personal possessions!"

Luke's face brightened. He said, "That is a promise I intend to remind you of Colonel. As for opening this drive unit, if you've had time to monitor your tapes in Ben Hooker's office you'll know I've already stated that I don't believe the unit is intended to come apart. As far as I'm concerned, no coin or any other material object is going to open it. You've read our reports? Then you know there is no material connection between the control board and the drive itself. The control board contains several hundred units; we have pinned down the function of about half of them. None of them is in any way physically linked to the drive.

"This device," he explained, pointing to a rough diagram on his desk, "is a course computer. It offers the pilot an almost infinite combination of simple, pushbutton destinations. Spatial and hyperspatial, if we can believe Morph's gibberish."

Starrett scowled impatiently. "All right. What's your point?"

"Just this: Each component on the board is linked to a central transmission unit. The purpose of this unit is to send wave

impulses to the drive. The linkage between the drive and the control board is *strictly electronic*.

"So the drive is permanently sealed in its impervious casing of God knows what; and for a very good reason: It doesn't *need* to be opened. All maintenance or repair, if any is ever necessary, is performed by impulse signals from the board. Some of those units are obviously designed for such a purpose. I haven't found them yet, and I don't intend to push any buttons to find out if I'm right."

"I'm afraid not everyone at Control agrees with you," said Starrett. "They consider the possibility that one of those 'buttons' might open the drive unit."

Luke nodded. "I've considered that. And I don't believe it. I believe it would be disastrous to open the casing, if you could, because I think it was put there partially as a safety device. I think the reason for this is that the drive does not totally 'exist' in its casing during certain phases of its operation." Luke smiled grimly. "Tell the people up at Control to come down and push buttons. If they're lucky, they *might* push the one that deactivates the drive. If they are not, there's a good chance they can be the first men to reach Andromeda. The hard way. Frankly, I don't believe Morph

would be foolish enough to leave his ticket home wide open; not if he knows anything at all about *Homo Sapiens*."

Starrett regarded Luke with cold, impersonal eyes. "All right," he said patiently, "I've read your reports. I don't have the technical background to agree or disagree with you; I can only say that if your scientific reasoning is in any way similar to your—erratic, personal actions, my former opinion still stands. However, as I said before, I think it's time we quit sparring with each other. You and I both know I didn't come here to discuss drive units. You are evading the issue, which is the *reason* behind your interference with other departments of this project."

Luke remained silent.

Starrett sighed. "All right. Forget it. Just tell me one thing. You know something you're not telling me. It has nothing to do with the ship or the drive. Am I right?"

Luke nodded. "You are," he said.

Starrett's shoulders relaxed slightly. He leaned against the side of the ship. "I see. Then at least we're getting *somewhere*," he said caustically. "Let's take it a step further. Are you withholding this—information because you feel you are being

persecuted? Out of bitterness toward me?"

"No," said Luke flatly, "I'm holding back because I can't tell you anything until I have the information you're holding back." Luke smiled. "You see? It's a stalemate, Colonel. And I'm afraid it's up to you to break it."

Starrett drummed his fingers against the hard gray shell of the ship. He stared blankly at the ceiling for a moment, then shook his head slowly and reached into the pocket of his jacket.

"I'm probably making a fool of myself, Hurstmier," he said stonily, "but that can't be helped. My job is to see that you do yours, period; so I'm going to overlook that policy we were discussing. Frankly, I think I'll regret it. Let's just say my curiosity has gotten the best of my judgment. I'm going to show you something. On one condition: I want your promise that you will not, in the future, attempt to—extort—information from other departments. Do you accept these conditions?"

"I do, and gladly, Colonel," said Luke.

"All right," Starrett sighed, "here."

Luke held out his hand and felt the tinkle of heavy coins drop into his open palm. He moved away from the Colonel and held them under a strong

light. There were six coins. Four seemed to be in the same language; none, he knew immediately, contained the curly symbols he had become familiar with from the Archerian control board. All of the coins were beautifully and finely engraved. Luke felt his heart pump wildly into his throat.

"The composition of the four in your right hand is a very high grade of silver hardened by some process to the strength of steel," said Starrett. "The other two are a platinum and gold alloy. Also hard. Metallurgy says they'll all last forever."

"I believe it," said Luke breathlessly. He faced Starrett. "Has it occurred to you as—peculiar, that none of these coins are from Archerius?"

"Not at all," said Starrett. "Morph explained that he was on a trip away from home. He says coins of all systems have relative values on all other systems. Incidentally, I might as well tell you. These are Morph's *only* personal possessions."

Luke's brows raised. "No clothes? Personal papers?"

Starrett shook his head. "Morph says he was born with all the clothes he needs. He says he needs no papers, that the carrying of documents is a primitive custom, and his religion forbids the wearing of ornaments."

Luke made a face. "That gives me a little more evidence for what I've been thinking, Colonel. Morph seems to have a logical answer for any question he may be asked. It's all just a little bit too pat for me."

Starrett's eyes narrowed. "You said 'evidence,' I believe. Evidence of what?"

Luke glanced at the coins once more and handed them to Starrett. Then he eased himself back into his chair. "All right," he said finally, "you've kept your end of the bargain. Here's mine. I think Morph has told one lie after another from the moment he arrived. I don't believe that nonsense about 'spatial disturbances.' I don't believe he was forced down here at all."

Starrett's gaze hardened, and his eyes raised slightly. "That's not your responsibility, Hurstmier," he warned.

"Hold it," Luke held up a restraining hand, "I think you'll understand when I'm finished. Hasn't the possibility entered your mind that Morph may not be all he seems to be?"

"Naturally," Starrett snapped, "we've kept our minds open to any possibilities. So far, we have no reason to believe he's anything except what he says he is. Do you?"

"Several reasons. Morph contends he comes from a highly developed intergalactic civiliza-

tion, complete with planet-wide hospitals, universities, etcetera, etcetera. Yet this so-called civilization is incapable of building their own starships."

Starrett straightened up.

"Now what's that supposed to mean?"

Luke continued, ignoring the question. "Two, the ship he came in has been stripped of every item made in Archerius before it landed."

The Colonel raised his eyes in a silent plea to Heaven. "I knew I'd be sorry," he mumbled, "all right, Hurstmier, getting back to your first statement; suppose this ship *wasn't made* in Archerius. Canadians drive American cars, Italians fly British jets. So what? I'd certainly expect that sort of decentralized usage to extend to an intergalactic level."

"Granted," said Luke, "but why strip the ship of everything from your own planet? Why unless you didn't want anyone to see your own products?—or if you didn't *produce* any?"

Starrett was silent. Luke hesitated a moment, then decided the time was certainly as ripe as it would ever be. He reached into his pocket and took out the thin metal disc.

"You gave me some coins," he told the Colonel, "now here is one for you. Only you're getting the poor end of the deal. I found

this inside the instrument panel. It had slipped down a crack into the course computer unit."

Starrett examined the object critically, then stared blankly at Luke. "It's a coin. So what?"

"So it's an Archerian coin. The engraving matches the writing on the instrument panel. It's the *only* Archerian object we have besides Morph himself. Compare it to the other coins. Do you know what it's made of, Colonel? I did the analysis myself. It's tin, coated with a little bit of silver chock full of impurities."

Starrett took another look at the coin. It was indeed a sloppy job of minting. The edges were slightly ragged and uneven, and the imprint was off-center, with half the profile of some Archerian dignitary missing entirely. The only possible comparison that Starrett could think of was a poor example of early Roman.

"It's a lousy job," he admitted. "But it doesn't prove anything. Maybe it's a souvenir, or something. I certainly don't believe it's a contemporary Archerian coin, if that's what you're driving at."

"Maybe, maybe not," said Luke. "I could be wrong about the coin. I don't think so, not in the light of everything else. I *know* I'm not wrong about the ship. I'm an engineer, Colonel. It's my job. That ship has been

thrown together from about eight different species of space-craft. Sure, the outside's beautiful—that's because it came that way. The rest of the ship is a big nothing."

"But you don't know that," Starrett argued.

Luke stood his ground. "I *do* know that," he said firmly. "I can tell a slicked-up jury-rig when I see one. We've probably got half, or one-third of the entire Archerian trading fleet right here in front of us."

Starrett shook his head in disgust. "Anyone can dream. Hurst-mier, what possible reason—"

"—could Morph have for pulling the wool over our eyes? I couldn't say. I only know he's lied about his technology, and that leads me to believe he's probably lying about everything else. It seems to round out that way."

"Look," Starrett said patiently, "you are a businessman, a trader. You land on the biggest desert island in the world. The natives are rich and friendly. What are you going to do, kick 'em in the teeth?"

"Certainly not. I'm going to be very friendly, con the natives out of their pearls and spices with a lot of wild promises; then I'm going to steal quietly out of the harbor on the first dark night that comes along."

"Oh, for God's sake, man," yelled Starrett, "don't carry the analogy to the point of the ridiculous! We're not natives. We *know* the difference between pearls and worthless trinkets and Morph knows that. Why should he botch up an untouched, wide-open market?"

Luke grinned weakly. "I've read the papers, Colonel. I've listened to the tapes. Every time Morph gets his hands on that idiotic translator he makes another wild promise. The whole world's eating out of his hand, waiting for Utopia. And what has he actually shown us? Has he told you anything you don't already know? What have we got? A hacked-up spaceship that Morph threw together, and a drive I'll give you ten to one he couldn't begin to explain in a million years. I *know* he didn't make it. And oh, yes, we've got a coin. We've got a coin manufactured by a race of sloppy, technological pygmies!"

"You're only guessing," said Starrett. "You're just guessing."

"Well, while we're *guessing*, how do we know Morph didn't come down to check us out for—"

"I know," said Starrett tiredly, "for an invasion fleet. We've considered that. What if he did? If we let him go and he is a scout we've had it. If we keep him here or kill him we've got

one chance in a billion that he came barging in here without telling anyone where he was going. Do you believe he'd do that?"

"No," Luke admitted. "I don't. But then I don't really see Morph in the conqueror's roll, anyway. I don't think he could stay awake long enough to invade anything. As far as I'm concerned he's a plain, double-dyed, slick as a whistle con man. Period."

Starrett got slowly to his feet, suddenly aware that he had been sitting on a greasy crate for the past ten minutes. "Is that all, Hurstmier?"

"That's all I can think of at the moment," said Luke.

"Well, it's certainly been fascinating. You know, of course, that I can't keep you on the project?"

Luke nodded. "I figured as much."

Starrett regarded him solemnly. He bit his lip and shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry, Hurstmier, I'm really sorry, but—"

Luke waved aside the apology. "Forget it, Colonel," he grinned. "Just promise me one thing, will you?"

Starrett stopped at the door and turned. "What's that?"

"Next time you talk to Morph; keep your eye on your wallet, huh?"

Luke was already pulling pa-

pers from his drawer when the Colonel slammed the door behind him.

Dr. Ben Hooker stared straight ahead, ignoring Starrett's hoarse, floor-pacing harangue. Luke sat next to him, doodling on one of those clean white pads that are standard equipment at every conference table. Below him, half a dozen military and civilian members of the project squirmed in various stages of discomfort.

"What - I - cannot - understand," growled Starrett, "is how you let him get out of the hospital!"

"No one let him do anything, Colonel," said Hooker. His voice was tired and strained. "We took his leg out of the cast and everyone just sort of—went to sleep. We have no idea how he did it but I suspect he had some sort of sleep inducing powers we—"

"Bahhhh!" said Starrett.

"It's quite reasonable, what Dr. Hooker says," one of the civilians noted. "The technicians on duty used to complain they got tired just looking at Morph."

Starrett shot a fiery gaze at the man. "And it didn't seem important to report a detail like that? Don't you realize every fact, no matter how fantastic it may seem, must be considered when you're dealing with an unknown factor?"

Luke cleared his throat loudly and gazed thoughtfully at the ceiling.

Starrett glared at him. "I was expecting some sort of comment from you, Hurstmier. You expected this, I suppose?"

Luke shook his head. "I expected him to leave, Colonel. I really didn't think he'd go about it like this, though. I guess he figured he could do without the natives bidding fond good-bye from the shore."

Starrett reddened. "If I remember correctly, his prime objective was to con us out of our 'pearls,' wasn't it?" He turned sharply to one of the uniformed men. "Did he take anything from the hospital? Anything missing at Aberdeen? Anything? Anywhere?"

"No, sir, said the man, "just the ship, sir—"

Starrett glared the young officer back in his chair. He turned to Luke.

"He got what he came for," said Luke calmly.

Starrett's eyes narrowed. "Which was?"

"Once I read an article about a clan of con artists that travels around the country in Cadillacs and trailers, bilking the public. I can't remember the name; it's a whole family, all related and all crooked. They hit a town like the plague, painting houses with cheap whitewash that runs off in

the first rain, selling 'imported' woolens that fall apart when they're cleaned. The police have been on to them for years and they warn a community when the clan is about to hit a town.

"I imagine whatever serves for a police force in the Galaxy is just as well aware of Morph and his crew. Which is precisely why he 'happened' to steer onto a backwater planet, ripe and ready for plucking. I'll bet he's opened up more new planets than all the exploratory ships in the system!"

"But he didn't sell us anything," Starrett argued.

"He didn't sell you anything you were *expecting* to be sold," Luke corrected. "He sold you Morph, that's all he needed to sell."

Luke grinned. "The funny thing is he could have had anything he wanted, just for the asking. But the con man's psychology doesn't work that way. He *has* to bilk the public or it's no fun.

Luke turned to Starrett. "Morph praised our medical achievements until he was blue in the face, and you finally got the idea. He certainly worked hard enough to give it to you. Am I right, Ben? Didn't you work up a preventive vaccine for Archerian respiratory ailments?"

Ben's mouth fell. "Yes. I did. I was glad to be able to do it, of course, and—"

"—and the authorities that be thought it would be a grand lever to pry a generous trade concession from the wealthy Archerians," Luke finished.

"It was a gift," Starrett added defensively.

"Sure," said Luke. "Only you didn't *exactly* give it to him, he stole it."

Ben shook his head in disbelief. "I find it incredible to believe anyone would go to so much trouble for a—free cold serum."

"Trouble! For something he can sell back home for whatever he decides to ask? No trouble at all, Ben."

"But why us?" balked Starrett. "Couldn't he get his blasted vaccine on some more, ah, advanced planet?"

Luke grinned. "I told you. You have to *buy* things on advanced planets. Besides, it's more kicks to bilk the natives. Anyway, they're probably on to Morph everywhere else."

"Incidentally, Colonel, I took another long, hard look at that Archerian coin. We were both wrong. It's neither primitive nor contemporary."

"I guess it's the final insult," Luke grinned. "The only thing Morph left us is a very poor attempt at counterfeiting."

THE END

# THE HERO

By MILTON LESSER

*He returned to earth, a hero, gracefully accepting the adulation of millions. He was a fine figure of a man, completely worthy of all they did for him and every citizen realized how great he was. Except for a single child who listened and watched and said to himself, "I am going to kill this man."*

IT'S WHAT you get for being a kid, I guess. I'll admit it, I was jealous when Nelson Rutledge returned to our town. I hated the sight of Nelson Rutledge. I hated the high school band for playing those stirring victory marches they play so well. I hated the crowds and the noise and the laughter and the bright streamers and the confetti and everything they greeted Nelson Rutledge with. I hated the reporters from the New York newspapers who came down to cover Nelson Rutledge's homecoming. He'd already been to Washington and New York, of course, to

see the President and the United Nations. He was getting another homecoming here in his hometown. And I hated it.

Because Nelson Rutledge shouldn't have been alone. My Dad should have been with him, only my Dad was dead out there somewhere in Alpha Centauri.

People began to talk about me right after the homecoming celebration. That Barry Green sure is a sullen child, they said. It's a tragedy what happened to his father, they said, but what's done is done and Nelson Rutledge has taken the next great step for-

ward for humanity, and since Barry Green's father helped make that so magnificent achievement possible, Barry oughtn't to be so sullen.

Even my mother figured it ought to be that way. Two days after Nelson Rutledge had come back to our town she said, "You're the man in this house now, Barry. Tonight you're going to have to act like one."

I didn't know what was coming. I said, "Don't worry about me, Mom."

"I know this is going to be difficult for you," my mother said. She's a slim, dark-haired woman in her middle thirties. I guess I must be getting grown up, because although I'm twelve I didn't think the way I used to that being in your middle thirties was practically the same as being senile.

"What's going to be difficult for me?" I asked.

"I've invited Nelson Rutledge and his son here for dinner tonight."

"Hey, *Mom!*"

"Now you listen to me, Barry Green. I wanted to do it, you understand? Nelson Rutledge was your father's best friend. Besides, he was with your father out there in Alpha Centauri. He can tell us the last thing your father

said and did. Don't you want to know?"

"I guess so, but—"

"But what? Tommy Rutledge hasn't been lording it all around the schoolyard, has he? Is that it?"

"No . . ."

"Then what?"

"Forget it, Mom. I'll be all right tonight. I promise."

My mother kissed me on the cheek and went to make the stuffing for her turkey. Right away I started thinking, *Holy Mackerel*, Nelson Rutledge's wife has been dead for years so maybe he's got designs on Mom.

Tommy Rutledge has freckles all over his face and he's always grinning at you and talking friendly. You just can't dislike Tommy Rutledge.

"Howsaboy, Barry?" he shouted as my Mom led Nelson Rutledge into the next room. I had smiled, wooden-faced, at Nelson Rutledge. I had let him shake my hand, man-to-man fashion.

"Great," I said automatically. "Just great."

"Boy, have you got a sour puss."

I grinned. The way he was grinning all the time, it was contagious. "I'll live," I said.

"You'll survive," he said.



He gripped the poker and advanced grimly.

We sat down and clapped each other on the thigh, still grinning. I liked Tommy Rutledge. It's too bad I liked him. It would have been easier if I didn't.

About half an hour after the Rutledges, father and son, got there, my mother went into the kitchen to baste her turkey or whatever a hostess does in the kitchen before dinner is served. Tommy was up in my bedroom looking at my astronomy books and the big star charts which decorated the walls and the kodachrome taken on the Martian north pole at high noon in summer by my Dad on his last successful expedition.

I paced around the living room for a while and then I figured Mom would like it if I went in and acted friendly with Nelson Rutledge, because he was our guest. He was sitting out on the enclosed porch and I went out there quietly. It wasn't intentional: that's the way I walk, without much noise.

The autumn sun had already set, painting the western sky with red and purple. A brisk wind was blowing in from the mountains and the sea beyond them. I almost thought I could smell the brine of the sea, which was very unusual in our town.

Nelson Rutledge was seated on a wicker-backed chair between me and the setting sun so all I could see of the Great Man was his silhouette. There was no one else on the porch.

But Nelson Rutledge was talking to someone.

Mumbling, really. So softly you could hardly make out the words. I shouldn't have listened. It was impolite. But waiting on the porch like that, Nelson Rutledge shouldn't have been talking to himself. Besides, it wasn't just jealousy. I hated Nelson Rutledge for some reason I couldn't figure out. Call it intuition if you want, but I read in one of my mother's psych books somewhere that one day soon they'll be able to explain intuition scientifically. Anyway, I listened to him mumbling to himself.

"They lionized me," he said. He seemed very happy about it. He seemed excited. "In New York at the United Nations and in Washington at the capital of their strongest country. When I came home to my hometown, I was a conquering hero. I never saw anything like it. But it certainly fits in admirably with our plans. They're naive. They trust me. They never trusted someone so much in their history.

"With Jeffrey Green I cancelled their earthbound heritage by landing on their planet's satellite and on three of their Solar System's planets. Naturally, there was no intelligent life. They weren't satisfied. They wanted more. They wanted adventure. So they sent Green and me to Alpha Centauri and . . ."

His voice trailed off. He shook his head as if he had just been swimming under-water and broke surface. He looked at me. I couldn't see his eyes because the setting sun was behind him. He was just a black shadow sitting there but I knew he was looking at me. In a very soft voice, almost a whisper, he said, "How long have you been standing there like that, Barry?"

"Oh, a while, I guess," I said, purposely vague.

"What did you hear?"

"Hear? Should I have heard anything, Mr. Rutledge?"

He got up and came over to me. He's a big man with wide shoulders and a good physique. He's built just about the way my Dad was. When they were younger they played college football together and Nelson Rutledge made end on the All-Conference team.

"I guess not," he said finally, shaking his head. "But you shouldn't go spying on people."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," I said. For some reason, I wanted to taunt him. I had to taunt him. So I said, "Tell me, Mr. Rutledge, what does lionized mean?"

He reached me very quickly. He got his big hand on my shoulder and his fingers squeezed. My whole shoulder went numb and I wanted to call out but didn't. I clamped my lips shut and he still squeezed and I could feel my eyes filling with tears. He had swung around so that the setting sun's final light was now in front of both of us. I could see his face for the first time. Nelson Rutledge is a handsome man, but he looked awful right then. It was his eyes only. There was something in his eyes that didn't belong. I don't know what and I don't know why. It was—it was like, well, if your town has a cistern of clear cold mountain water but there's the carcass of a dead animal rotting away in it.

"You're hurting me, Mr. Rutledge," I said.

"I want you to tell me exactly what you heard."

"I won't tell you anything until you let go of me."

Reluctantly, the pressure was eased. Reluctantly, his hand slid off my shoulder.

"Now then. What did you hear?"

"Nothing," I lied. "I don't know what you're talking about. If you touch me again I'll call my mother."

Just then Mom called, "Dinner! Dinner, everybody."

Automatically, I headed for the kitchen. But I hadn't taken two steps when he caught me with his hand again, this time gently.

"How would you like to hear," he asked quickly, "exactly how your father died?"

"I'd like to hear that," I said.

"If you don't tell your mother about anything that happened out here, I'll tell you exactly how your father died. Is it a deal?"

"When will you tell me?" I wanted to know. I was trying to keep the eagerness from my voice. Kids aren't very good at that and I could see the way Nelson Rutledge was smiling he knew I was eager all right.

"End of the week," he said. "My place. Say, after school on Friday?"

"Well, if you can't make it sooner."

"Then after school on Friday it is. But remember, not

one word about what happened."

There was dinner and small talk after dinner and I guess my mother was too polite to ask Nelson Rutledge about Dad the first time, because she didn't bring up the subject at all. After a while the two Rutledges left and my mother looked almost happy for the first time since my father's death.

"Well, how did you like him, Barry?" she said.

"He was all right, I guess."

"All right? Nelson Rutledge was your father's best friend. And he's a great man now."

We talked a little more about it, then I helped Mom with the dishes and went off to bed. All the rest of that week I couldn't get anything done in school or at home or anywhere. I only remembered how Nelson Rutledge had been talking to himself. That was all I could think about. It wasn't just that he talked to himself. A lot of people do that and all of them aren't crazy. It was what he said.

He had talked about human beings, about earth people, as if he wasn't one of them. He had talked about them in the third person, like you might talk about a herd of cattle. It

didn't make sense and I knew I had to find out about it. Somehow, incredibly, I figured it had something to do with my father's death.

Friday was the first cold, sullen day of autumn. A pretty strong wind whipped up and tore the dying leaves from the trees and swirled them around, piling them ten feet high against the cyclone fence of the schoolyard as I went by on the way to Nelson Rutledge's house. There was a nip in the air, all right. It made my ears go numb, and my fingers and the tip of my nose. Blue ribbons of smoke drifted up out of a lot of chimneys in our town for the first time since early spring. The sky was gray and brooding and I thought if it got any colder it would snow. That's the way the weather is around here — sudden changes.

I should have guessed something was fishy when Tommy Rutledge wasn't home. Tommy was my friend. If I was coming to visit his father, Tommy would be home. Unless Nelson Rutledge hadn't told Tommy I was coming.

The Rutledge place is on the edge of town, about a quarter of a mile past where

the railroad tracks go by Hank Miller's big red barn, the one that attracts all the tourists. The Rutledge place was a big old colonial house, something pretty rare these days. It was dark enough for there to be a light burning on the ground floor, although it wasn't four o'clock yet. The light was unsteady, flickering. As I neared the front door I realized it wasn't an electric light at all. It was coming from the fireplace.

I knocked on the door and Nelson Rutledge opened it. He was wearing a smoking jacket and had a calabash clamped between his teeth. If anybody else in our town tried to smoke a calabash, it would have looked silly. It didn't look silly on Nelson Rutledge at all.

"Isn't Tommy here?" I said.

"Out playing football, Barry. Are you coming in, or do we both freeze out here?"

His whole attitude toward me had changed, I could sense that. He wasn't hostile now, or threatening. He was trying to be very man-to-man. He had something up his sleeve, I thought, and it wasn't just telling me how my father had died even if that was the reason I had come here.

We went inside to the room with the fireplace. It was a large room with a high-vaulted ceiling and bare beams up there in the shadows and heavy leather furniture and a big fieldstone hearth blazing with cannel coal.

I got lost in one of the leather chairs and Nelson Rutledge sat down in another one. He puffed on his calabash and then put it down on an end table. He said, "You hate me, Barry. Don't you?"

"I didn't come here to talk about that. I came here to talk about my Dad."

"And we will. We will. But you *do* hate me?"

"Does it matter to you, Mr. Rutledge, if one small, unimportant person in town doesn't like you and doesn't even know why he doesn't like you?"

"Thank you for being so frank, Barry. To me it doesn't matter at all. It matters to someone else."

"You mean Tommy? Tommy and me are still friends."

"I'm not talking about Tommy."

"Then who?"

Instead of answering, he sat there looking at me. When he picked up his calabash and clamped his teeth on the stem, I said, "I came here because

you said you would tell me how my father died."

"And so I will."

"I'm listening. What happened out there at Alpha Centauri?"

My first surprise came when he said, "Your father didn't die at Alpha Centauri, Barry. He died on the way back."

"On the way back? On the way back—"

"That's what I said."

"But—but doesn't that mean you killed him? How else could he have died on the way back? And if that's the real story, why didn't you tell it to everyone? Why did you have to lie?"

"Did it ever occur to you, Barry, that humanity might not be alone in the galaxy? That there might be another form of intelligent life? A form perhaps as superior to mankind as mankind is to the primate ancestors from which he evolved?"

"What's all this got to do with—"

"I'm coming to that. The second planet of Alpha Centauri was not a dead planet as we reported, Barry. It was a dying planet. It still harbored some life—and some hope."

"Hope for who? If you say hope, do you mean intelligent

life?" In spite of myself, I was interested. Finding other intelligent life had been my father's quest, his dream. One way or another, he had died for it.

"Yes, Barry. Intelligent life. But almost their entire race had perished in the bleak cold of Alpha Centauri's second planet."

"You said life more advanced than human life. If they were more advanced and if they were dying, if their planet was dying, why couldn't they build a starship like we built a starship?"

"Because our progress has been in the physical sciences while theirs has been in the mental sciences, in psychology."

"Why are you telling me all this," I said, "if it's true? Why didn't you tell it to the President in Washington?"

"There were two left. Only two survivors of a great race. Their physical bodies had perished but they still existed—mentally. I can explain it no other way. And then we came, your father and I. It was what they had been waiting for, for untold millennia. A chance for survival. A chance for physical rebirth. A chance to bring the benefits of their civilization to another world, a world

more backward than theirs had been."

"You mean Earth? You mean here? To conquer us?"

"I didn't say anything about conquest. Conquest is an ugly word. Say direct. To direct us. Their science was such that they could realign the electrical impulses of their bodiless sentiences in such a way as to possess—does the word frighten you?—to possess my brain and your father's. But there was one complication, Barry. Once the realignment was made, it was permanent. It could not be altered again. Once the alien sentiences committed themselves, they were committed for all time. It's ironical, isn't it, that one of the subject minds was too shallow, too narrow, to harbor greatness?"

I said nothing. I believed him. He wouldn't be telling me something like this unless it were true. Still, he shouldn't be telling me at all. I didn't know why he was telling me. I figured he had a reason and I would find out what that reason was if I listened.

The fire burned low while he spoke. The cold autumn wind howled outside and shrieked down the chimney.

fluttering the tongues of flame.

"Your father's was that mind," he said. "Originally, we both agreed to the 'occupation.' The realignment of electrical impulses was made. The aliens inhabited our brains. It was wonderful, Barry! I can't explain how wonderful. It must be experienced. But we are like children compared to them, like children.

"And on the way back to Earth, your father balked. There must have been something contrary in his nature, something hostile to progress. He said he would tell everything that happened when we reached Earth. Obviously, that was impossible. Obviously, men being what they are, our plans depended on secrecy. Your father had to be liquidated."

He did not say killed. He said liquidated. It was a very inhuman word. It had nothing to do with death as humans think of death, but my father was dead.

And Nelson Rutledge had killed him.

Looking back on it, I'm amazed I didn't take the big wrought iron poker from the hearth and strike him with it. I'm only a boy: I'm not supposed to understand these

things. But somehow I knew that something far more important than my father's death was happening in this firelit room as Nelson Rutledge spoke.

I merely said, "You killed him?"

"We had to kill him, don't you see? Secrecy was a necessity, because we're not planning a physical conquest. Wherever I go, I'm lionized. I won't be forgotten. Going to Alpha Centauri and returning is better than Columbus, Barry. And we're not living in the days of superstition in which Columbus lived. I'm a very important man now. Very important. My counsel will be heeded on all matters pertaining to spatial exploration. It's an easy step from that to other things, bigger things. If I play my cards right, I'll be the most important man in the United States within a decade. Does that sound wild to you?"

"No, sir," I said. It didn't sound wild at all. I was awed—and afraid.

"You're probably wondering why I bother to tell you all this. I was going to tell you sooner or later, Barry. When you overheard me out on the porch in your mother's house, I decided to tell you right away."

"Who were you talking to out there?" I said. I knew the answer; I was sure I knew it. But I wanted to hear Nelson Rutledge say it.

"To the other sentience. The one that inhabited your father's body before I was forced to kill him. It's waiting, Barry. It still wants to inhabit a body. Don't you understand, Barry? The relationship is not parasitic. It's symbiotic. Do you know what those words mean? The alien sentience won't live off you, giving you nothing in return. It has a great mind for you to share, a great racial memory of a culture which pales anything humanity has produced, pales Periclean Athens and the High Renaissance and pales our own Twenty-first Century into insignificance . . ."

"Me?" I said. "Me?"

"Of course you, Barry. Don't you realize that's why I told you?" He stared for a few moments into the dying fire, saying nothing. Then: "Don't you realize that if you are your father's son the alien sentience will also be able to inhabit your body as its companion is inhabiting mine? Don't you realize that you're the only one on Earth it can inhabit?"

"I . . . I didn't know," I

stammered. I was trembling then. I wished suddenly I was grown-up. A grownup would know what to do about this. At any moment I expected something alien to enter my brain.

"The reason I have told you," Nelson Rutledge said, "is because the occupation must be on a voluntary level. Occupation of your mind by force is impossible. Now, Barry—will you co-operate with us? Will you help us rule the world? We need you here very much."

I tried to keep my face blank. Kids aren't very good at it. Grownups are much better. *But I had to keep my face blank because I knew Nelson Rutledge was telling the truth and I knew at once that I would have to kill him, whatever the consequences.*

I stood up and paced back and forth. "I'll have to think," I said.

"I don't expect your answer immediately, of course. But if you want a sample of what the alien sentience is like, relax your mind and we will allow him to enter for a moment."

"Only for a moment? You promise?"

"Of course I promise. It is entirely voluntary on your

part. Your father was able to reject it, wasn't he?"

I nodded. I waited for something to happen, but my mistake was expecting something physical. Not gradually but all at once I began to have new thoughts. They were wonderful thoughts but arrogant thoughts—and alien thoughts. I saw great cities and a mountain range higher than the Himalayas and hideous sluglike creatures in clothing and then long eons of freezing cold and brooding sentiences dying off one by one and it was a breathless alien panorama but somehow unclean and ugly. I didn't know why. I couldn't explain it. I only knew that the Alpha Centaurian sentience which inhabited Nelson Rutledge's body and the one which wanted to inhabit mine and could inhabit none other than mine were somehow, inexplicably evil. And I knew that this evil would bring a time of troubles greater than mankind had ever known if I didn't do something about it. I—and no one else.

"That's enough!" I cried. The alien thoughts vanished suddenly. Nelson Rutledge had kept his word—probably because he had no choice.

"Well?" Nelson Rutledge demanded.

"What happens if I say no?"

"I could probably do it alone, Barry. It would be easier with you."

"But what happens if I refuse?"

"That night on your mother's porch, you heard me talking to the second alien. Today I have explained everything to you. You know too much, of course. If you refuse, we shall have to kill you."

I looked at him. I looked at the heavy poker on the stand in front of the fire. He had to die. For humanity's sake, he had to die. The alternative was a subtle enslavement for humanity. Probably there would be no chains, no overt signs of slavery. But we would be slaves, chained to the alien vision and alien culture and alien memories I had seen. Our civilization would no longer develop along human lines but along those of the alien . . .

It would be a far greater evil than mere physical enslavement. There was nothing subtle about physical enslavement. We would rebel and conquer it. But here there would be nothing to conquer—

I lunged suddenly toward

the hearth. I got my hand on the poker and lifted it. Something blurred toward me and I swung around with the poker, the stand clattering. Nelson Rutledge's big fist struck the side of my face. My senses swam. There were two Nelson Rutledges hovering there. I could feel my knees buckling. If I fell, if I collapsed at his feet, he would triumph. For my actions had told him my answer more clearly than words. He would kill me.

I went down to my knees. The poker clattered on the hearth. Tears stung my eyes. Outside the wind howled and it was suddenly a peaceful sound, not a wild fierce one. It belonged. It was part of the Earth we all knew and loved.

His strong fingers found my throat. He had killed my father and he would have no compunctions about killing me.

A small point of flame began in my lungs and spread. I couldn't breathe. I wanted desperately to breathe but could not. I knew it was only a matter of moments. In moments I would be dead.

Dimly, far away, I heard a sound. It was the noise of a heavy door slamming.

The pressure on my throat

was gone. I lay there at Nelson Rutledge's feet, sobbing in great lungfuls of air. I felt the strength returning slowly to my arms and legs. I waited.

And Tommy Rutledge, wearing football padding and carrying a helmet under his arm, came into the room. He stared down at me. He stared at his father.

He didn't seem shocked.

"You know?" Nelson Rutledge said.

"I know. You talk in your sleep." Tommy Rutledge had a baby-face, a freckled kid-around-the-corner look, but what was in his eyes was ugly.

"And it means nothing to you, son?"

Tommy ignored his father and helped me to my feet. "You better get out of here, Barry," he said.

"He's not going anyplace," Nelson Rutledge insisted. "He knows too much."

"Who'll believe him?" Tommy said scornfully. What was in Tommy's eyes was worse than what was in his father's eyes. The older man merely believed in the greatness of the Alpha Centaurians. In Tommy's eyes was a bold, ambitious lust after power.

"I'll go now," I said, edging toward the door.

Nelson Rutledge took a step after me, and another one. Tommy got between us but his father cuffed him out of the way savagely with a stunning open-palmed blow. Tommy went sprawling, football padding and all. Nelson Rutledge ran at me and I sidestepped and all at once I bent down and the poker was in my hand again.

"Keep away from me!" I cried. "I'm warning you."

He came toward me as if he hadn't heard the words.

"You killed my father. I'm not afraid to kill you."

His fingers clutched at air as I sidestepped. Then he reached out and caught my left arm, using it as a pivot to swing me in toward him. I knew if his fingers closed on my bruised throat again, everything was finished. He was a murderer. He was potentially the worst dictator the world had ever known.

I swung the poker with all my might.

It made a crunching sound as it hit him and he was dead instantly. He hit the floor and rolled over and the side of his head was crushed. I looked at him and was ill for a moment.

"I won't tell on you," Tommy said.

"I'll tell on myself," I said.

"You don't have to." I didn't know what Tommy's motives were, but I said, "I'm going to the police."

I told the police this story exactly as I told it to you. They didn't believe me. I was a resentful child. Hadn't I made it pretty clear that I hated Nelson Rutledge? But I was sick, they said. I really believed my story, they decided. I needed psychiatric care. They sent me to a state hospital fifty miles from our town and I told them the same story there. They listened patiently and for a while I thought they would believe me, but in the end it was the same. I'm beginning to understand the big words now. *Diagnosis: paranoia. Prognosis: favorable, due to age and the fact that he's sane except for this one delusion.*

Mother visits me often. She's very sympathetic but she doesn't mention my story at all. I've stopped telling it to people. The word is that I'll be pronounced sane within six months.

Yesterday, Tommy Rutledge visited me. They wouldn't let him come sooner but at this stage of the cure they thought it might do me some good.

Now I understand Tommy's

motives, and they frighten me. Because the next time I kill I won't be a child and they won't call it insanity. It will be murder, even if it is murder to save the world from subtle enslavement.

It all depends on Tommy. *If* he becomes important. *If* he's on his way to being a national power when we both grow up.

Because when Tommy came to visit me he said, "Tell me, have you changed your mind yet?"

"About what?" I asked him.

"About you know," he said, and stared off into space and spoke to the second alien sentience, which still hadn't found a permanent home.

THE END

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# THE RED TELEPHONE

By JOHN JAKES

ILLUSTRATED by GRAYAM

*Colt had to find the traitor before atomic war broke out. One word would give him the clue.*

**I**N THE affairs of nations—in the precarious dark-street games that must remain forever hidden, unguessed and unrevealed—now

and again there are happenings even more secret than the most secret, demanding a priority even more urgent than the most urgent, requir-

ing the services of a man even more trusted than those most trusted of all. A man, for example, like David Colt.

In a roaring thunderstorm a huge B-52 bomber loomed through the darkness at Offutt Air Force Base, its radar bleeping frantically, the eight-engine giant slowed ponderously and stopped. Before the engines had died David Colt had paid his thanks to the crew which made the emergency flight from Washington. Outside the bomber a jeep waited in the prairie rain. The driver, a lieutenant colonel of SAC, slammed into gear, u-turned and careened off between the strip beacons toward the fourteen - acre headquarters building, aglow with lights behind sealed windows in the Nebraska night.

Did the officer know much of the situation? David wondered. His light blue eyes studied the driver's face. "Lousy night," David said casually. "I'd much rather be eleven miles up north in some quiet little Omaha bar. Or in a Washington bar, for that matter."

The lieutenant colonel turned and stared hard, his eyes hollow, his face spattered by rain. "Nobody is in Omaha tonight, Mr. Colt. They've

been dragging them back for the last four hours." The officer's hand shook as he lit a cigarette and steered with one hand. "I wonder if we might be fighting the third world war, this time tomorrow."

David's nerves tightened a notch. No matter what the degree of knowledge of the truth on this sprawling nerve-centered base, they *knew*, somehow. Perhaps intuition came from courting death in their planes, high above the breathable air, waiting for the signal on the red telephone that would spell their fulfillment and their destruction. David's head buzzed. He'd been at a Washington party the night before, and wished now he hadn't. The jeep screamed to a halt. The grim lieutenant colonel pointed.

"Right through those doors, sir."

Halls in the vast three-winged building were crowded with white-faced, nervous men wearing blue uniforms and silver wings. Of course they did not realize what was happening belowground—nor did David, fully—but a red alert had been posted, and red alerts came infrequently. David's raincoat hung in soggy, humid folds. A colonel

directed him to the entrance underground. The mood haunting the SAC base was frighteningly contagious — those in below might be on the lip of panic. Of them all, David had to be calmest. It was damned tough.

Eight minutes after the B-52 roared down David was through the first foot-thick steel and concrete door and into a tunnel in The Hole.

Officers escorted him down through the operations and intelligence levels, down past the additional checkpoints on the communications level, past the decontamination rooms with their Sniffer fall-out detectors, showers and clothing treatment cells, to a final door with a one-way-glass panel. After a fourth search of his person David was allowed through that door into the command center, the very lowest level of the forty - five - foot - deep, two-acre underground warren of the Strategic Air Command.

He was in a glass booth which covered one wall of the center. The red telephone stood near, unused but checked for operation twice daily. David had never seen it before. He shuddered. General Mayes had used that telephone to call the White House in the late afternoon. A cap-

tain in shirt sleeves and no tie left his microphone. "Mr. Colt? General Mayes is waiting up on the balcony with command staff. Stairway to your left."

David nodded and hurried up, getting only a quick glance at the vast teeming floor of the center. He'd seen the twenty-foot-high fluorescent map panels with ladders drawn up before them, men changing figures and making marks every other second. The banks of computers, the color television cameras hooked to the Pentagon war retreat — the whole scene frenzied now, charged with dangerous uncertainty. He'd seen the unmarked maps on roller panels, behind which were ranked duplicate panels with the alternate war plans clearly charted out. *Who else had seen?* he wondered, running up the stairs. *And how much?* He must find out. The Hole was sealed off from the human world until he learned the answer.

As he opened the door at the head of the stairs, shedding his raincoat as he stepped into the glass-enclosed balcony, he heard a harsh voice:

"... and you spent the prescribed ninety days in train-

ing before you were assigned down here, Major Lawes, so you know exactly how long we can hold on. There is a two-thousand-foot well under the floor. Food for thirty days. Three Diesels for power and light. Everything we need to sweat you out, mister. All those people on the floor down there—they've got families expecting them home at the end of eight hours. We've been here twelve but we can stay here twelve days or twelve months if necessary, starving, and we will, believe me, until you open your mouth, mister. Until you tell us exactly how many photographs you've taken of the plan maps."

"The camera is not mine," said a haggard young man seated in a chair before a black bakelite table running the length of the balcony. "The lighter is not mine. I've told you, I've told you, it isn't mine."

The first speaker—a young-faced officer with ghostly eyes and pure white hair—spotted David and came through the group standing uncomfortably around black-haired Major Lawes who slouched in his chair with great dark blue rings of sweat under the armpits of his light blue shirt.

"Colt?" asked the white-haired questioner.

"That's right. You must be General Mayes."

Brigadier General Gordon Mayes said that he was. Briefly he introduced David to the four other officers on the balcony. Colonel Andrew Priggott, thin, scholarly; Colonel Oliver Bernstein, hair awry, chewing a pipe; Lieutenant Colonel Hutchinson Young, a tall, stiff young man well over six feet; and Major Francis Varelli, small, intense, bird-eyed, tapping his polished shoes without stopping. None of the men responded to the introduction with more than a grunt. None wore their jackets. All looked sweaty. The balcony was clogged with cigarette smoke. On the bakelite table lay a dozen black ashtrays heaped with butts, plus torn cigarette packs, pencils, several cigarette lighters.

Mayes seized David's elbow. His breath whistled between his teeth. He needed a bath, as did all of them. Panic burned in desperately controlled sparks, far back in his eyes. "Downstairs, please."

They halted just inside the booth below. David saw the red telephone again; beyond it, the frantic scramble in the concrete pit, the vast lighted

panels, the red figures being posted, erased, re-posted, minute by minute: number of thermonuclear weapons, number of crews on all bases as of thirty minutes ago, conditions of the jetstream, the wind off the Moroccan coast now and an hour from now—panel after panel, the story of a war that might—or might not—come during that very next hour.

"That man in the chair," David began. "Lawes . . .?"

"Major Jack Lawes, yes, that's him."

"He's the one, eh?"

"That's right. Colt," Mayes was curt and impolite in his nerves, "we don't think you'll be any better down here than men who know Lawes personally. However, I did request an answer from the White House—that's why I used the red telephone this afternoon—and since they chose to send you here, our facilities are at your disposal." Mayes lit a cigarette with yellow fingers. "I've been on Lawes for five hours straight. He's groggy. Or he acts that way. They are trained to be excellent actors." Rushing on, Mayes said: "Do you want to question him?"

"I'll try. Is he married?"

"Yes."

"Could you get his wife

down here? It might be a way."

"All right, if you think it's necessary." Mayes spoke to a captain at the booth control panel. The man began to telephone. Mayes returned. David said:

"You haven't said anything about an answer to your question."

Mayes leaned against the thirty-inch reinforced concrete wall, giving one short, tired snicker. "I almost knew the answer this afternoon. But tell me anyhow."

"Your request for permission to use physical torture on Major Lawes is denied, by the President."

"I expected that."

"It was thought I might help. Understandably, you don't believe I can, but you've been down here twelve hours. I've at least got fresh wind."

Mayes smiled, in a sad, ghostly way. "And executive blessing. How much do you know?"

David knew a smattering from a short teletype report and thirty minutes spent with the President in the muggy Washington twilight. Together he and Mayes verbally pieced together the circumstances:

Thirty-seven hours earlier,

the CIA had picked up on an unfriendly agent in Paris an eight by ten photograph which when wirephotoed to Washington, proved to be a section of one of the vast sliding panels hidden behind the sterile—unmarked—map panels on the top-secret lower floor of the Strategic Air Command control center, Nebraska. This meant that someone had virtually achieved the impossible; had penetrated to the most secret room in the United States; had photographed at least a portion of the maps showing how, and from where, SAC would launch a bomber and missile counter-effort in event of a surprise attack.

Investigation teams had been sent immediately into The Hole. They uncovered, in the wick cap of the cigarette lighter of Major Jack Lawes lying in the butt litter of the bakelite table above, an impossibly intricate miniature camera. Lawes denied knowledge of it. The security teams had withdrawn. The Hole had been closed until Lawes broke down. Mayes had telephoned Washington for permission to use torture.

"Do you realize," he demanded now, "what it can mean if all the war plans on

those panels have been photographed and sent out of the country? There will be a period of six months to a year when we'll be sitting ducks. It takes time to work out plans as complex as the ones SAC uses."

David nodded, chain-lighting cigarettes, "You're certain Lawes is guilty?"

"I think so," Mayes replied slowly. "That's not the point."

"The point is, how many photos did he take, and how many got out of the country?"

"Yes."

"He denies it all?"

"You heard him upstairs."

"How's his record?"

"What difference does that make?" Mayes replied bitterly. "He's been an officer since nineteen forty-four, but if he's been trained for some such task as this, it was back beyond that, when he was still almost a kid. He can probably outlast everything we throw at him. They usually can. Sometimes they can even survive torture for indefinite periods." Mayes bristled. "Excuse me for saying it, but the President sits in the White House and worries about nice-nelly scruples, and right now some clown may be pulling print after print of those maps out of a developing tank, and we just don't know."

We may not have a single strategy left."

"The point is," David shot back, "to crack Lawes fast. If we do that, the rest will follow—how much gone, how much left."

Mayes stiffened. "Think you can do that?"

"Let me try."

"Where do you want him?"

"Alone in a room on one of the upper levels. His wife next door, if possible. Wait, though. Wasn't there something in the short teletype you sent about four cigarette lighters?"

Mayes, half-way up the stairs, spun around nervously and gave a tight nod. "Colonel Priggott, Lieutenant Colonel Young, Lawes and Major Varelli flew in the same outfit in the second. The Tokyo milk runs. All men serving in The Hole have got flying experience. We happened to get four on this tour from the same outfit—who, in a fit of mad wartime comradeship," Mayes with heavy tired sneering, "had a batch of nice shiny lighters made up for all the boys, with wings and everything."

David's light blue eyes glittered. "I saw a lot of lighters and cigarettes lying on that table upstairs. Were the

lighters of the other three checked for miniature camera devices?"

"Of course, of course. Clean."

"There could have been a switch, if everyone leaves his cigarettes in the open."

"I think Lawes is the man," Mayes replied doggedly. "We have to start there. We have to find out, one way or another. We have to have an answer."

Mayes took four steps with two leaps. David called, "Any prints on Lawes' lighter?"

"His own."

"Did the security people check your staff first or last?"

"Why—" Mayes hesitated. "Why, last."

"Then any of the other three might be guilty—might have had time to make a switch."

Mayes came clattering down the steps again, furious. "Colt, you don't work here eight hours a day, thinking about how quickly we can all be blown and burned off this whole wide world, you don't understand the problems. Time, time counts. Every second. Every split second. If there should be an attack, we will have maybe twenty minutes to get ready, maybe forty-eight hours to decide who controls the world for

the next thousand years. Lawes has a lighter with his prints upon it which contains a camera. We must begin with Lawes. We must answer the question of Lawes first, because it is probably where the right answer lies. The other way around will lose too much time. Answer Lawes for me, yes or no, for certain, and then I'll start on the others, or you can. Or start on the others yourself, for all I care. Just do not spend more time on the others than it would take you to crack Lawes." His eyes burned down the stairway. "I beg you, don't play with two hundred million people that way."

"Okay," David answered in a non-committal fashion, gnawing his lower lip. He waited for Lawes to be taken to an upper level. His gaze kept straying to the red telephone, its lines hooked to the White House and every SAC base around the globe. Three or four words spoken into that telephone—there would be bomber death screaming above the air, missile death whispering above the oceans, cities vanishing in the flash, strange blubbery mutations crawling crippled out of fall-out ruins . . .

He shut his eyes. Time, time. Mayces was right.

Five minutes later he entered a concrete-walled chamber off a gloomy tunnel on the communications level. Major Jack Lawes regarded him blankly from a straight-backed chair in the center of the room. Without speaking David took off his tweed jacket and his tie and rolled up his sleeves. He used an extra chair to unscrew the bulbs in five of the six ceiling fixtures, leaving a single cone of light on Lawes. The sweaty young man, his skin pale and grimy-looking, continued to stare. Little colored lights blinked on the untended banks of coders along the walls. David extended a pack of cigarettes to Lawes.

"No thank you," Lawes said, not raising his eyes from the concrete floor. David walked twice around him in a slow circle, studying Lawes' black hair gleaming with tonic and perspiration at the temples, reminded David of a photo he had once seen of the author Kerouac—a tired, mildly indifferent, blank face. That was the difficulty, thought David, beginning to sweat harder. The pliable wall of flesh. You looked, and looked, and listened to answers, and somehow you had to determine, ultimately on the basis

of personal judgment, whether the black unseen brain behind the flesh held the same truth as the words and the shape of the face—or whether words and shape lied, and the black rehearsed brain laughed. How did you ever know? Hunch, guess, belief. A red alert was up. To make it come out properly he had to make the right judgment. He circled the indifferent officer a third time, stopping.

"Major Lawes?"

"What." Not even a verbal question mark. David waited him out. "What?"

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-seven."

"Where were you born?"

"Cloverdale, Indiana."

"Where is that?"

"Ten miles east of Vincennes, Indiana."

"You're lying, Major Lawes. It's ten miles south of Green-castle, in the center of the state."

"You know Indiana?" Little bored black lights flickered defiantly in Lawes' eyes.

"It's my business to know a few things. Why did you lie?"

Lawes shrugged, massaged his knuckles. "Seven hours old man Mayes has been talking to me, asking questions. I've told him the truth. He doesn't believe it. You won't believe it. The balloon has gone up,

as we SAC officers say down here in The Hole, referring to the next war, which I appear to have started." Lawes raised his head sharply. "In all their minds, I have already started it. In your mind, too." Lawes folded his arms, crossed his legs, turned sideways in the chair, distant.

"I don't necessarily believe it."

"Did the CIA send you?" Lawes said.

"I ask the questions," David replied, deliberately, hardening his tone.

Lawes hiccupped, the only mirth his weariness would allow. Under the cone of light, computers blinking, David began to pace and stalk the circle again. Coming in front of Lawes once more, he reached down and forcibly tore the silver wings from Lawes' uniform blouse hanging over the back of the chair. Lawes raised his eyes, glazed, curious. David held out the wings.

"Do these mean anything to you, Major Lawes?"

All pretense at humor vanished. Lawes was stripped down to indifferent grubby-eyed weariness. "I don't know any more. I've been down here twelve hours, I may never come out again unless I answer in the way you want me

to answer. That isn't the way things used to be done. I don't know about those any more, that's all."

"The Hole must be closed till we learn who took pictures of the war plan maps."

"Not me," Lawes said, dumbly shaking his head. "Not me. I didn't."

"It was your lighter with the camera in the wick cap."

"No, not my lighter."

"You identified it, didn't you?"

"All four of the lighters look alike—mine, Varelli's, Young's, Priggott's. I thought it was mine—"

"Until they found the camera," David said cynically.

"Yes." Lawes showed a bit of defiance, his chin jutting. "Yes, that's right."

"How do you explain the camera?"

"Someone else had it in a lighter, and gave it to me."

"One of your three friends gave it to you? One of the men you flew with?"

"Someone else," replied Lawes doggedly, refusing to follow the thought.

"Do you know how serious this trouble is, Jack?"

"Let's skip the first name relationship."

"Do you know, Major?"

"No, explain to me," Lawes said with nasty sarcasm. "Ex-

plain all about it to me, mister man from Washington. I am just a poor little fly boy, I don't understand all the work I do down here, screwing around with maps and charts. It's just a game, I guess, just a . . ." He spun his back to David and glared into the dark. "You don't believe any part of it. Take me upstairs. Kill me. Just stop asking the questions. You don't care what the truth is. You want me to answer one way. I can't. I can't answer what's not the truth. *Leave me alone. It was my lighter. There . . . !*"

Smiling, Lawes snapped his head around once more, rising from the chair, bent forward at the waist, palms up. "There, *there*. It's my lighter. I was born in Moscow. My father raises potatoes. My mother is a little mother of the steppes. I never went to Ohio State, I spent six years in espionage school. *There!*"

Lawes gestured flamboyantly. David stepped back out of the light, having seen this reaction in men before, this giggling, talkative, care-nothing state which was in fact a drunken state born of mental exhaustion. Lawes stepped out of the light also, waving his arms. "My lighter with my prints. One of my teeth is a

bomb. We're all going to be blown up in five minutes. Better run. Better teletype the Pentagon. Better put your cloak on and pull down your hat and give me the password." Lawes grew less smiling, eyes glazed, talking for David, making gestures as if to draw attention to himself.

"Come on, the password, the password now, you Man from Washington . . ." And he lunged.

David turned his body sideways and shot out a straight right. The jolt numbed his shoulder. Lawes spun and went capering back across the room. David unbarred the door and stepped into the corridor. A lieutenant with a rifle tried to peek through the opening. David stepped across the hall as the door closed. He heard a bit of sobbing from the coding room before the door shut. He fished in his pocket, found only a broken cigarette in his pack and lit the ragged half. Mayes approached through the pools of light along the tunnel floor.

"Well?" Reproof had already been delivered, with that single word.

David puffed the ripped cigarette feverishly. "He seems almost at the point of hysteria, I don't know."

Mayes scratched his head.

"You *have* done this sort of questioning before, haven't you?"

David grew irritated. "Many times, General. But I'm not perfect. Neither would you be, knowing how carefully they train their people in dissembling. Years and years of indoctrination."

Mayes licked his lips, preparing for a fight. "Colt, I'm afraid we're going to have to do things differently now. I still have command authority in The Hole. I'm going to bring Varelli, Priggott and Young up here, one in a room, and . . . and . . ." Mayes thoughtlessly massaged the gold wedding ring on his left hand. ". . . and put men to work with truncheons. I don't care if all of them die, I'm going to get an answer. We can't wait."

"If there is another way of doing it," David said, his voice remarkably hard, "and we try yours instead, you could be finished in the service."

"I don't much care. There might not be any service."

"I was sent here and I'm going to finish it my way, General."

Mayes scowled and squinted. "What are you, a college-boy diplomat? Another nicely with inspirational UN

pamphlets in your pocket or something?"

"Any time," David said slowly, "you want to take me on, General, I'll be glad to oblige." He felt rash, full of bluff. He had no answer. But he said: "If Mrs. Lawes is here, I want to see her. I want enough time to complete things my way. Or I swear, General, if there's one man of higher rank left alive after tonight, I'll finish you in the Air Force."

David had never raised his voice. Suddenly Mayes looked away, shamefaced. There was a short silence.

"Right next door—Mrs. Lawes—"

It took but a moment for David to arrange that the interconnecting speakers between rooms be turned on, so that Lawes could hear through the speaker imbedded in a foot of concrete. David greeted Sandra Lawes politely. She showed no sign of recognition when he gave his name. He shut the door behind him. Sandra Lawes was a pretty natural blonde in her early thirties, warmly worn round the eyes and knuckles as all young mothers become in the early thirties. She made a bulky, sleepy picture in her middle-priced blue woolen

coat and the scarf tied over her pin curlers.

"I don't understand this, Mr. Colt. Has something happened to Jack?"

"Your husband is in good health, Mrs. Lawes."

"Then what's this all about? I left the children at home—they may wake up, the little one, Jack Junior, gets frightened if I'm not there—"

"Your children will be cared for," David said flatly, fighting his instincts and feelings to make the words come out precisely hard and right. "You may not see them for some time—some weeks, in fact, but someone will watch them."

"Several weeks?" Sandra Lawes tried to laugh. Is this a joke? If it is, if it's some kind of ghastly prank—"

"Your husband is a traitor, Mrs. Lawes. He was caught with a miniature camera which he had been using to photograph material of a highly secret nature in the command center. He is not leaving this underground station, nor are you, until we have a confession from him, or from you, or from both of you. What your husband has done is so serious, Mrs. Lawes, that we can't afford to have scruples. I'm sorry to tell you that I was sent here by

the President, authorized to instruct the SAC people to use physical torture on either or both of you. Time is vital, Mrs. Lawes. Your husband had refused to cooperate, so I'm sorry to tell you that we'll have to start with you. We don't have a choice. You'll be sent for within half an hour."

David shot from the room, leaving the young woman sick and gasping amid the coding machines. The door clanged. He signed the lieutenant to open Lawes' door, thrusting Mayes roughly to one side. His heart hammered. Sweat coated his chest, his back, casually dribbled down his neck, the sweat of nerves and desperation. He appeared to step into the room where Lawes was imprisoned but he made sure that he moved at once to the side of the door, his back to cold concrete.

Lawes swung around. He was standing on his chair in the shadows up near the ceiling near the metal grating of the inter-room speaker. Slowly he climbed off the chair. His mop of black hair shone, eyes were bright.

"That was Sandra I heard . . . ?"

"I left the speaker open deliberately, Major, so that you could hear the exact price

of your refusal to admit the truth."

"You'd touch her, too?" Lawes moved forward with the methodical slowness of a madman. "You'd touch her?"

"I'll kill her, if necessary, to get a confession."

"No you wouldn't," Lawes said. He seemed to be talking to himself. He scraped his feet on the concrete, a step at a time. "No, you wouldn't touch her, wouldn't do that, no. You wouldn't."

"I came straight from the President, Major. I have power to do anything I wish."

David stepped away from the wall as he talked. A raw animal sweat-stink filled the gloomy chamber. The coding machine lights blinked on, off, in many colors. Lawes reached out and down slowly as David went on: "I will take your wife Sandra and strip her and subject her to hurts and indecencies for a week, if that's the cost of having you tell the truth about the lighter."

Lawes grunted to himself. He reached out and down for the flimsy chair in the cone of the light. David peered at him, crazy with doubt, caught in an agony of doubt, trying to read the flesh-wall of the face, the truth or the falsehood behind the eyes, trying,

trying for truth until his head ached and hammered with red pain . . .

Lawes caught up the chair, everything released. He hurled the chair. He followed it in a demented dive, screaming:

"God damn you . . ."

This time David had his head smashed brutally against the concrete; had fingers tearing at his throat, a knee blasting dull misery into his groin. He dodged, punched, managed to slip to the side and fumble at the door. Lawes was a maniac, growling, cursing, seeking to maim or kill. A hand folded in David's shirt. He heaved himself through the door. His shirt tore nearly in half. The lieutenant gave Lawes a boot in the stomach and dived against the door. David ripped free, panting. A strip of expensive pale blue Oxford cloth shirt material hung limply from the shut door's crack. Mayes glared, astonished.

"What was going on in there?"

"Walk with me upstairs," David said grimly. "I know now what we have to do."

"In the name of . . ."

"Don't talk please. You brought up the subject of time. There's one thing left to do." David gripped the brigadier general by the arm,

urging him along the tunnel, talking quietly as they walked.

From the control booth of the command center David stared out over the floor of the beehive pit below. He picked absently at the strips of his shirt. General Mayes came clattering down the stairs from the balcony, followed by the remainder of his staff. Thin, scholarly Colonel Priggott; pipe-chewing Colonel Bernstein; stiff Lieutenant Colonel Hutchinson Young; and Varelli, the major, tapping his brightly polished shoes. The half-dozen other junior officers ranged at the mikes and equipment along the front of the booth paused in their work, keeping their heads front but listening to every word. David surveyed the staff.

"General Mayes wished me to tell you that we have learned the extent to which the secrets of this room have been spread to the enemy. Lawes has confessed." David watched. An expression flickered here; another flickered there. Nothing telltale. Slowly he reached out with his right hand. He laid fingers around the receiver of the red telephone. "Gentlemen, I have been connected upstairs with the President and the Joint

Chiefs of Staff, who have been in constant session since nightfall. I have relayed the extent of the damage done to us by Major Lawes, and have received instructions in turn. What Lawes has done, has forced the President into a step none of us ever dreamed we might have to take."

Now the officers at the microphones sat rigid. Now men stopped on the floor, turned, looked up, pale, sensing somehow what was happening.

David jerked the red telephone off the hook. He extended it. "General Mayes, you're in command."

"I can't," Mayes replied. He shook his head. "I just can't." He turned his back on David and looked at his staff. "We will have to inform everyone in The Hole that . . . that none of us may ever leave here alive." He breathed with a rasp. "Lord have mercy on us." Then, swiftly, to alleviate the pain, he swung and said to David: "You received the Presidential order. Go ahead."

David raised the red telephone. Through the glass he saw every face turned, watching. For no reason his hand trembled violently. He pressed the telephone to his mouth. He stared down through the glass. "Open all lines." Five

seconds passed. Ten. He said: "Activate option B."

"*Nyet! Nyet! Nyet!*"

Colonel Andrew Priggott lost his masks and screamed hysterically.

David jammed the red telephone receiver down, ran forward, jerked Priggott from the hands of Young and Varelli who were helplessly trying to control the officer's hysteria. David rabbit-punched Priggott four times to unconsciousness. Mayes giggled like a child. No one could speak. Mayes managed to bite his lips and say:

"Varelli, get your butt down on the floor. It wasn't the real thing, it was a gag."

Varelli's brown eyes popped in horror. "A gag . . . ?"

"Do as you're told, dammit," Mayes quavered. "Hutch, get connected with the switchboard and tell them to open the lines again." He pointed to the red telephone. "You heard me, open the lines. The phone has been dead for ten minutes."

Suddenly everyone in the command center jerked to frenzied life; except the fallen enemy Priggott, shocked at last into guilt by the final horror of the final demolition. David felt limp and running with sweat. He and Brigadier

General Mayes grinned foolishly at one another.

"Colt, I have to hand it to you. I never heard of a longer nuttier hunch. And Priggott—" Mayes stared down, shaking his head. "I would have sworn, of all my men, he would have been the most trustworthy. I hoped to give him a boost up in rank, some day soon."

"That's what he wanted you to think, I suppose, all the time he photographed, and when he switched the lighters. Now you can crack him—find out how many years ago he was trained, how much he transmitted. All the wheres and hows, now that you know. Oh . . ." David blinked. "Lawes. And his wife. Can I go down to them, if you don't need me?"

"You're asking my permission?" Mayes replied soberly.

David found a handkerchief in his back pocket and mopped his face. He wanted to

sleep eighteen hours. Mayes said:

"You couldn't have been completely sure . . ."

"Not completely, no." David eyed the red telephone and let the horror of what he had done—even in trickery—drop painfully away. "But I wanted to push Lawes as far as possible, with his wife. And one thing, General, that I learned a long time ago . . . no matter how far they—" He gestured at the groaning Priggott, trying to rise on all fours. "—no matter how far they're pushed, no matter the extremes of torture or mental suffering, there are one or two fundamentals which they can't alter or disguise with a hundred years of training. Just because it is a fundamental, screamed from the moment they're born. I've never known one—not one—who ever dared invoke the name of God." David added: "To bless or damn."

THE END

JACK VANCE

4 I-C-A-Bem

ROBERT SILVERBERG

46 ENTRANCE EXAM

ROGER DEE

58 CONTROL GROUP

ALBERT TEICHNER

70 THE FORELIFE MYTH

NEIL BARRETT, JR.

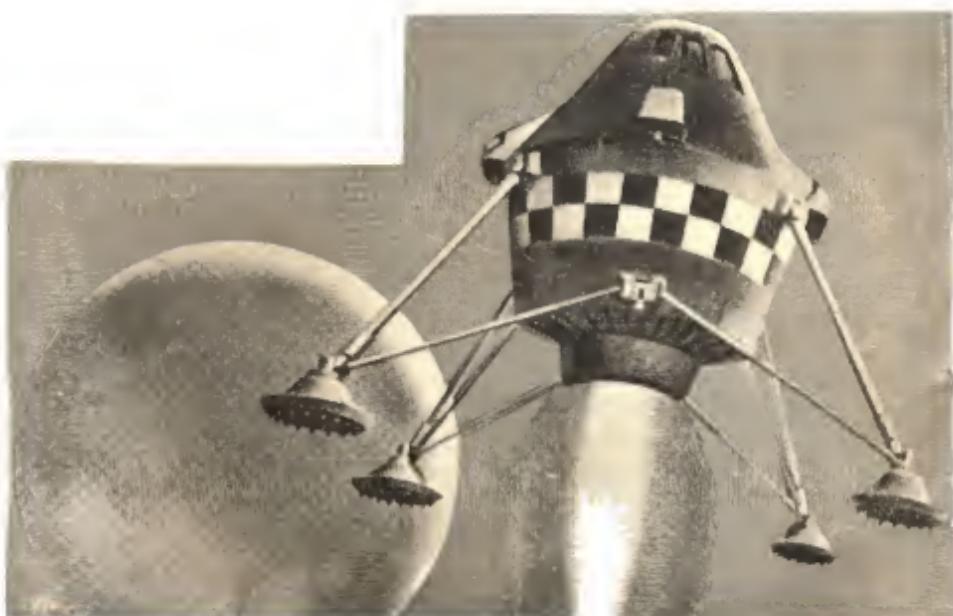
84 MADE IN ARCHERIUS

MILTON LESSER

101 THE HERO

JOHN JAKES

116 THE RED TELEPHONE





870